AMBROSE SEMINARY

EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL

REFLECTIONS ON JOB 42

by

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OUTLINE

OT 650 The Book of Job: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People
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Spring, 2012
Proposition: This paper focuses on the conclusion to the book of Job in addressing a number of issues that are ultimately resolved. One of the keys to understanding the entire book is developing a correct hermeneutic regarding interpreting God’s charge against Job’s three friends. In what sense are the lengthy discourses by Job’s friends inaccurate regarding their understanding of God? In the repentance of Job found in chapter 42, is Job succumbing to ‘retribution theology’ and its prescription to his condition? Finally, in the restoration of Job, is God being forced to restore to Job all that he has lost? In other words, is God supporting a predetermined response to Job’s repentance?

I. DEVELOPING A PROPER HERMENEUTIC IN INTERPRETING GOD’S CHARGE.

A. God’s charge against Job’s friends (vss. 7, 8).
B. An understanding of ‘Retribution Theology.’
C. The book of Job is a corrective to an overly optimistic view of life.
D. Jesus had to apply this corrective in John 9.
E. A new form of retribution theology is seen in the ‘prosperity gospel.’

II. THE REAL REASON JOB IS REPENTING.

A. The difference between God’s charge and Job’s friends calls for repentance.
B. Job surrenders his desire for personal vindication, thereby passing the test of disinterested piety.
C. Suffering can produce spiritual maturity (vs. 5).
D. The mystery and value of suffering supported in various New Testament texts.
E. Ministering to those who are suffering.

III. AN UNDERSTANDING AS TO THE REASON GOD RESTORES JOB.

A. Job’s restoration is an expression of God’s grace.
B. The meaning of Job’s restoration.
C. The application of restoration for those suffering today.
I. DEVELOPING A PROPER HERMENEUTIC IN INTERPRETING GOD’S CHARGE.

A. God’s charge against Job’s friends (vss. 7, 8).

How are we to interpret the discourses of Job’s three friends, in light of God’s evaluation of what they had spoken regarding the ways of God to Job? “After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.’”¹ What was it that they had spoken about God that wasn’t right? They had falsely charged Job of sin based on an incorrect understanding of the nature and ways of God.

God designates the friends’ misleading speech as folly. This is not simply thoughtless, uninformed, or frivolous speech. ‘Folly’ in the OT always has a wilful edge to it, rejecting the purposes of God—thus the fool is culpable for failure to fear God rightly and follow his path. It seems here, therefore, that the friends fall under the judgment of sin because they promulgate a distorted worldview and use that view to condemn innocent sufferers as sinful persons.²

This suggests that a danger does exist for people who profess a faith in God, but hold to a distorted notion of God and His ways. Like Job’s friends such people do need to be corrected, repent and experience a genuine restoration. Keil and Delitzsch, contend that in their haste to justify God, Job’s friends deviate from speaking the truth about Job.

In order that they may only maintain the justice of God, they have condemned Job against their better knowledge and conscience; therefore they have abandoned truth in favour of the justice of God, -a defence which, as Job has told the friends, God abhors. …The ‘correct’ in Job’s speeches consists of his having denied that affliction is always a punishment for sin, and in his holding fast the consciousness of his innocence, without suffering himself to be persuaded of the opposite. That denial was correct; and this

¹ Job 42:7 New International Version of the Bible.
² Gerald Wilson, Job, New International Biblical Commentary, (Peabody, Ma: Hendrickson Publishers, 207), 473.
truthfulness was more precious to God than the untruthfulness of the friends, who were zealous for the honour of God.³

B. An understanding of ‘Retribution Theology.’

The three friends of Job reflected a theological understanding of the time, regarding the way God related to humanity. The essence of the theological position of Job and his three friends was more of a cause and effect relationship of human behaviour. To them obedience to God’s word implied a certain guaranteed response by God. If a person obeyed God’s word and did His will then they could expect certain blessings to flow into their lives: namely reputation, health, wealth, long life and the promise of children. What distressed Job is that God did not act according to expectation. The three friends made the assumption that if one is walking with God in integrity then the effects of covenant promise; namely blessings, would be forthcoming. However, since Job is experiencing the loss of blessings and is now experiencing the effects of covenant disobedience; namely, the loss of wealth, children, reputation, and health; then the logical conclusion is that Job had sinned. Based on their evaluation of the situation, the three friends are calling Job to repent of his sin in order to once again experience God’s blessings. The implication is that this will bring about restoration in his life. The intensification of their position is seen throughout their discourses as they are calling Job to repentance. Meanwhile, Job maintains his innocence from knowingly sinning against God. It’s this accusation against Job, formulated out of a wrong understanding as to the nature and dealings of God with humanity and applying it to every situation, that God is stating that Job’s three friends are not

speaking what is right. Job realizes from his experience that his suffering is not a result of sin. Job deeply feels that God is being unjust in the treatment he is receiving. This is reflected in God’s speech to Job. “Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?”

This experience of suffering moves Job away from retribution theology. Retribution theology simply teaches that suffering is a result of sin. What we are learning from the book of Job is something of the mystery of God and His ways. God does desire for His creation to submit in humble obedience to His words and ways, which can lead to blessing. However, this does not guarantee a life without struggle, difficulty, sorrow or pain. So, what Job is saying about God is correct.

The term ‘right’ is the Hebrew nekonah, “established as correct” and not tsaddiq, ‘righteous.’ This rebuke of the friends over against my servant Job does not amount to a subtle reverse declaration of Job’s righteousness. It is not the public vindication of his innocent suffering Job sought, but a confirmation that the view of God Job articulated during the dialogue is an accurate portrayal of divine reality, while ‘the friends’ words lead astray. Thus we must always be careful how we use the friends’ words to inform our worldview, since they have been declared inaccurate representations of God.”

Therefore, the theme of the book of Job is not about suffering as promoted by many, but deals with who the wise person really is. It is the person who trusts God, even though they cannot understand what is occurring in their lives. The prologue opens with a dialogue in the throne room of God regarding the nature of Job’s piety. The accuser is trying to cause God to destroy Job through the various tests of faith designed to reveal the nature of Job’s piety. Is Job

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5 Gerald Wilson, Job, 472.
serving God for gain?

C. The book of Job is a corrective to an overly optimistic view of life.

As canonical books, Job and Ecclesiastes, help to curb the overly optimistic view of life that one can develop from the book of Proverbs. Each book of the Canon helps the readers develop a proper understanding as to both the nature of God and the nature of human experience. In the book of Job we discover an innocent sufferer trying to come to grips with the reasons for the suffering that he is experiencing. Why is God allowing this to occur? Job’s response is one of great faith, as Job continues to look to God for hope and answers to his pain. Even though Job laments, he does not curse God (does not forsake the Lord). If the book of Job has a later date of composition it’s possible that the teaching of Proverbs, which generally presents an optimistic view of life, are then tempered through the experience of Job and the preacher in Ecclesiastes. The following proverb is typical of the kind of expressions that the writers communicate in the book of Proverbs. “No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.”

However, that this may be a general truism, there are exceptions.

This typical proverbial statement emphatically affirms that, in general, things go better for the righteous than for the wicked. The balance to this truth is found in Ecclesiastes, where the author (perhaps also Solomon) observed that in a fallen world righteous people sometimes suffer difficulty because of injustice. Job also suffered because of his righteousness. Job’s friends failed to understand the intention and limits of proverbial statements like this and inflicted great pain on their friend.”

D. Jesus had to apply this corrective in John 9.

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The strong covenantal blessings and curses that are communicated through Moses do lend themselves to retributive theology. This is seen even into New Testament times, when Jesus is asked by his own disciples about the cause of blindness that originates from birth. “As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.’”

Jesus is explaining that there are other reasons for God to allow suffering to come into a person’s life. In John 9, we discover that the purpose is for God’s work to be displayed in that person’s life via a miracle that will testify both to the man and the people of that time, the nature of Jesus Christ. This was a prophetic act that was a declaration of his true nature as the Messiah. This miracle later recorded by John is one of the signs to point out the true nature of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, and therefore has impacted the lives of people for all ages.

E. A new form of retribution theology is seen in the ‘prosperity gospel.’

One form of retribution theology is seen in the current prosperity gospel. The proponents of this message teach that faith is the key to receiving the covenantal blessings: which include health, healing, financial prosperity and a long and good life. Those who experience trials, challenges, sicknesses, or poverty are challenged to exercise their faith by giving and confessing their way to victory. If their circumstances don’t change then the issue is one of unresolved sin, or a lack of faith, which is another way of saying that they are sinning.

8 John 9:1-3 New International Version of the Bible.
Though Job should be a corrective to this teaching, the hermeneutical approach of the proponents of the prosperity message simply interpret Job’s experience of suffering as an expression of his fear rather than living a life of faith. “What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me.”9 In other words, Job received what he actually believed for, the fears of the curse of the covenant with God, loss of reputation, sickness, poverty and death of his children. The proponents of the prosperity gospel would also point to the conclusion of the book where Job is seen repenting (cf. Job 42: 6). Some would even suggest that Job’s prayer for his friends was a key to his prosperity returning. However, as Gerald Wilson relates,

“‘After’ here (as in v.7) does not establish a causal link between Job’s prayer and the restoration of his prosperity, as if God rewards Job for his gracious intercession for his friends. Rather, this temporal conjunction again emphasizes the important fact that Job acts as intercessor without any knowledge of the ultimate restoration that he would experience. Here again we see the disinterested character of Job’s submission and intercession.”10

The problem with the prosperity gospel’s interpretation is that it is basically the same approach that the friends of Job took, that Job sinned and therefore that was the reason for his suffering. However, the prologue explains to the reader that Job is declared by God to be “...blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”11 Job is not suffering due to something he had done wrong but rather this was a test of his faith in God. When correcting Job’s friends, God concludes that what Job had said about his innocence has been right;

“...because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.”12

What was it that Job was saying that was right? He continues maintaining that he had

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10 Gerald Wilson, Job, 474.
11 Job 1:8; cf. 2:3. New International Version of the Bible.
walked in integrity and had not turned his back on God. Job had not knowingly sinned against God.

It is critical that a correct understanding of God’s assessment of Job’s friends and Job is made. How we interpret Job 42:7-8 will either give us a false and simplistic view of God, which is retributive and mechanistic, or a willingness to live with a confident trust in the Sovereignty of God over life, which will include the sense of mystery. Therefore, a correct understanding or interpretation is critical in correcting a false and simplistic view of suffering as a result of sin.

II. THE REAL REASON JOB IS REPENTING.

A. The difference between God’s charge and Job’s friends calls for repentance.

Eliphaz charges Job with wickedness. “Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? ...Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way your prosperity will come to you. ...If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored: If you remove wickedness far from your tent…”

This reflects the judgment of the friends regarding Job’s condition. They are condemning what they perceive to be ‘sinful’ issues in his life; rather than truly comforting him in his losses. The prologue has already addressed the falseness of their judgments.

It is important to note that Job did not confess any overt sins such as those Eliphaz had accused him of (22:2-11) nor any covert sins as Bildad has implied (8:11-18). The text does not, in fact, specify what Job ‘repented’ of. Most who have come this far in the book say that Job confessed a bad attitude, a touch of arrogance, or mild blasphemy. I prefer to say that he confessed that his God had been too small. He needed the theophany to remind him of the fact that the God of the universe and the Creator of all creatures is greater, grander, higher, and wiser than a mortal can imagine much less.

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13 Job 22:5, 21, 23 New International Version of the Bible
challenge.”

What caused Job to respond to God as he does after God’s second speech? “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” The real theme wisdom comes to the forefront in the questions that God is raising to Job. Does Job really understand the scope of God’s created works? The conclusion of God’s speech is a short synopsis of the untamed animal kingdom. The point being made is the mysteries of this kingdom and the inadequate human explanations of life itself.

The animal realm is non-moral, and its sharp paradoxes make us see the inadequacy of human moral calculus. Violence in the natural world does not conform to the explanations that Job’s friends give for suffering, but neither does it fit Job’s protesting his integrity in the face of his anguish and loss. In the animal world, the tender care of young means gulping the blood of freshly slain creatures; it is ‘a daily rite of sustaining life that defies all moralizing anthropomorphic interpretation (Alter 1984:38). In this strange manner, divine providence care for all these esoteric creatures. Fecundity and violent destruction are twin forces working together in the imponderable mysteries of how God cares for his world.”

In other words, God’s thoughts and ways are beyond our ability to fully understand (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9). Through the appearance of God to Job in the whirlwind, Job comes to a deeper appreciation of who God is, though God doesn’t answer to Job’s charge of why He has allowed this suffering in his life. “Job may be ignorant of the higher wisdom principle that governs God’s design, but he has gained sufficient understanding to know that pursuing litigation is futile. He knows, at least, that the design of God is not governed by a necessary law of reward and

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retribution. God’s wisdom is of a higher order-and remains a mystery.” 17

B. Job surrenders his desire for personal vindication, thereby passing the test of disinterested piety.

In Job’s response to the LORD, he is now satisfied not with what he had originally asked for, which was to have an audience with God to present his case. God’s presence is enough for Job. “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. ...Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ...My ears have heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” 18

Job had now experienced God in a different way. What was once a more under-developed faith has now been galvanized through an experience that culminates in a meeting with God. God’s presence suffices for Job. Gerald Wilson sees in this meeting that Job has changed his mind about personal vindication.

It seems to me that what Job changes his mind [repent] about is his desire for personal vindication. ...Job definitively answers the foundational question of the Satan-whether humans can fear God without profit-when he retracts his desire for vindication at the end of 42:6. Remember, Job has no way of knowing that God will restore his fortunes and family when he makes the retraction.” 19

C. Suffering can produce spiritual maturity (vs. 5).

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19 Gerald Wilson, Job, 468-69.
Though suffering is not the primary theme of the book, it is one of the sub themes and some important elements are gleaned from the account that can be of help to those who are walking through a season of suffering. Though Job is never given an explanation for his suffering, we do find a benefit from his suffering. Job’s experience helped reshape his theological understanding as it moved him toward God for answers. God did reveal Himself to Job and challenged areas of Job’s thinking regarding His sovereignty, authority and power. We can actually see the growth of Job through this experience.

However, suffering alone does not produce maturity. There are those who become angry and embittered through experiences of suffering. Job, however, though expressing his anger toward God in his laments, actually retains his integrity by not turning his back on God. One of the great myths of contemporary Christianity is that God will never allow someone to endure more than they are able. The bible doesn’t teach this at all; rather as the apostle Paul points out, there will be times that are beyond our ability to endure, but the reason for this is in order for us to learn to depend on God rather than ourselves (cf. 2 Cor. 2:8-11). God will work at destroying self reliance in order to help us to not only rely upon Him, but to value the community of faith. “…But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God…On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.”

There are many New Testament texts that state that suffering is one tool that God uses to shape our lives. We are told to rejoice in our sufferings because they produce perseverance, character and hope (cf. Romans 5:3-4). Peter, also points out that it’s possible for a believer to

20 Corinthians 1:9b-11a New International Version of the Bible.
suffer evil, even though it’s undeserved (cf. 1 Peter 3:17).

…if the righteous God, who has established a moral order in creation, not only allows well-doers to suffer, but Himself wills that they should, it must be for some good reason and purpose. Far from such suffering being a penal consequence of their own evil-doing, in being thus ordered to happen to them, it must be intended to be a creative cause of good. God must intend that some profit or benefit should come out of it-for His own glory, for others’ good, or the personal good of the sufferer himself.21

Peter goes on to give us the supreme example of the good person suffering for doing what is good, as illustrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Jesus suffered according to the will of God, and for the benefit of humanity. One very dynamic reason God allows good people to suffer is to help others back to God.

Christ suffering brought men back into a right relationship to God, so too the suffering of believers can be a catalyst in helping others come to Christ and thereby be reconciled to the Father. This is not to suggest that the suffering of believers is redemptive in the same way that Christ’s suffering was redemptive.

E. Ministering to those who are suffering.

In evaluating the discouragement that Job’s three friend’s comments brought to him, David Atkinson challenges: “We will never help people if we come to them with predetermined theories and try to squeeze them into our mould. We need rather to learn from the opening scene on the ash heap the ministry of listening, of just being there. …We must learn not to judge a person’s spiritual standing according to his or her circumstances or fortunes.”22

Wisdom helps us realize that there may be a variety of reasons why they are experiencing

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suffering in their lives. It is true that God will discipline his children when they do sin. However, that is not the only reason for suffering that comes into our lives. In Job’s case it was a mystery. God allowed Job’s faith to be tested through an unexplainable series of events. Job was given the option to either blame, turn his back on God, or to trust God in spite of the negative situations in his life.

Suffering can help caregivers with their own sense of inadequacies and limitations as humans trying to express support and care. Suffering can help us to look to God in order to effectively minister to those who are suffering. So what can we say to those who are going through painful times? D. A. Carson points out: “Frequently in the midst of suffering the most comforting ‘answers’ are simple presence, help, silence, tears. Helping with the gardening or preparing a casserole may be far more spiritual an exercise than the exposition of Romans 8:28. The Scriptures themselves exhort us to ‘mourn with those who mourn’ (Rom. 12:15).”

III. AN UNDERSTANDING AS TO THE REASON GOD RESTORES JOB.

A. Job’s restoration is an expression of God’s grace.

Job was corrected because he endeavored to justify himself at God’s expense, and Job realized his error. A wise person is someone who is open to correction. God corrected Job. Job is restored to his priestly office as is evident by God sending his friends to him for prayer. We have a sense at the end of the book that joy has now come back into Job’s life in the naming of his daughters. His health, wealth and legacy are restored. Job’s status is restored. Job is able to

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forgive his friends for their attack against him. Job’s prosperity is not a mechanical thing, as the formula of retribution theology teaches, but rather it’s an expected thing in light of what has transpired. We can conclude then that what God grants to each of us is an expression of His grace.

It is in grace that God has made himself known to Job. ...Job thought he had fallen through a gap in the Creator’s management of the world. But now he is reassured. The Creator is holding all things by the word of his power; nothing—not even the silly ostrich or the terrible monsters—are outside his gracious hand. So Job can rest secure and live with his questions being unanswered. ...Job can rest in the mystery of God. Faith, we said, is what God gives us to help us live with uncertainties.²⁴

B. The meaning of Job’s restoration.

Not only is the restoration an expression of God’s grace, but helps us have hope for our present life in this world. Job was hoping for some vindication beyond this life. Here we see the mercies of God expressed in his current situation. His friends were commanded to go to Job in his priestly function in order to be reconciled to God. There is a poetic sense of vindication here for Job. He had been judged as a ‘sinner’ and God restored his dignity and priestly office. In the beginning of the book we see Job sacrificing and praying on behalf of his children, the book concludes with Job praying for his friends, which is a priestly function.

C. The application of restoration for those suffering today.

The fact that some of God’s people are restored even in this lifetime can bring great hope to someone who is suffering in this life and wondering if things will ever change. Job and

²⁴ David Atkinson, The Message of Job, 156.
Joseph are two Old Testament examples of people who experienced a powerful transformation in their earthly existence, where each suffered unjustly. It can also show those who are suffering unjustly, that God is Sovereign and He will restore, if not in this life, then in the life to come. F. Delitzsch aptly concludes that

…the book of Job is also a book of consolation for the New Testament church. From it we learn that we have not only to fight with flesh and blood, but with the prince of this world, and to accomplish our part in the conquest of evil, to which, from Gen. 3:15 onwards, the history of the world tends; that faith and avenging justice are absolute distinct opposites; that the right kind of faith clings to divine love in the midst of the feeling of wrath; that the incomprehensible ways of God always lead to a glorious issue; and that the suffering of the present time is far outweighed by the future glory— a glory not always revealed in this life and visibly future, but the final glory above.\(^{25}\)

Bibliography


San Carlos and San Ambrosio Seminary is a seminary in Havana, Cuba. It is the old School of San Jose de la Compañía de Jesús that later, in 1774 was open under the name of San Carlos and San Ambrosio Royal School Seminary. This building was erected by the Jesuits in the mid 18th century to house a seminary first founded in 1689. After the Jesuits were expelled in 1767, it was known as the St. Ambrose Seminary and in 1774 it was opened under the name St. Carlos and St. Ambrosio Royal School Seminary.

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