

## REFLECTIONS ON SUFFERING FROM THE BOOK OF JOB

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**W**ritten by an unknown author, possibly the most ancient literary account in the Bible,<sup>1</sup> the Book of Job is a mixture of divine and human wisdom that addresses a major life issue: Why do righteous people suffer undeservedly?<sup>2</sup> The Book of Job is also a prime example of Hebrew wisdom literature<sup>3</sup> that labors with the concept of theodicy,<sup>4</sup> which is a defense of the integrity of the justice and righteousness of God in light of the evil, injustice, and undeserved suffering in the world. Some writers have suggested that theodicy is the theme of the Book of Job.<sup>5</sup> If this is so, then the emphasis of

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<sup>1</sup> Ample evidence supports the claim that the setting of Job is patriarchal. See Roy B. Zuck, “Job,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 717, for nine reasons the Book of Job points to a patriarchal period. Archer and others see the Book of Job as the oldest book in the Bible (Gleason L. Archer, *The Book of Job: God’s Answer to the Problem of Undeserved Suffering* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982], 16). Alternate views are given in Édouard Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984); F. Delitzsch, *The Book of Job*, trans. F. Bolton, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949); M. Jastrow, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1920); and Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> “Undeserved suffering” does not imply that God unjustly placed mankind under the curse as a result of the Fall. Rather it refers to suffering that is not directly traceable to an act of personal sin or disobedience. This phrase does not imply that Job was sinless, nor that he was without sin during the cycles of debate. Suffering is undeserved in the sense of being or appearing to be unfair or unjust.

<sup>3</sup> David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), xxxviii. He points to three major issues in suffering: (1) How do we answer the why’s, how’s, and what’s of suffering? (2) Is there really such a thing as innocent suffering? (3) What kind of answers can be given when suffering?

<sup>4</sup> This is not to imply that “theodicy” is the one main theme of the book, nor that one main theme can be agreed on. While one may see one primary emphasis in the Book of Job, it encompasses several related themes. See the review on theodicy in Konrad Müller, “Die Auslegung des Theodizeeproblems im Buche Hiob,” *Theologische Blätter* 32 (1992): 73–79.

<sup>5</sup> For example Clines, *Job 1–20*, xxxiii.

the book is not totally on the man Job and his suffering, though he and his suffering are certainly central, but also on God Himself and His relationship to His supreme creation.

Job therefore is a book dealing with human suffering,<sup>6</sup> even though the suffering of the innocent<sup>7</sup> does not encompass the author's entire purpose. It is also more than an ancient play written to portray the absurdities of life, the weaknesses of man, and the prominence of the sovereignty of God.<sup>8</sup> The Book of Job shows that the sufferer can question and doubt,<sup>9</sup> face the hard questions of life with faith, maintain an unbroken relationship with a loving God, and still come to a satisfactory resolution for personal and collective injustice and undeserved suffering. These observations need to be addressed not only within the context of the suffering by the righteous man Job, but also because many believers today suffer and can identify with Job.<sup>10</sup> As Andersen points out, "the problem of suffering, human misery, or the larger sum of evil in all its forms is a problem only for the person who believes in one God who is all-powerful and all-loving."<sup>11</sup> Suffering, then, is the prominent issue that forces a consideration of the deeper questions posed by this concept, especially as it affects the lives of those who have a loving, intimate relationship with the true and living God. All the questions that relate to God, man, and Satan—justice and injustice, sovereignty and freedom, innocence and guilt, good and evil, blessing and cursing—are interwoven within the context of undeserved suffering. The Book of Job and its presentation of

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<sup>6</sup> "What one learns from suffering is the central theme" (Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Old Testament* [Nashville: Nelson, 1983], 1:145).

<sup>7</sup> Matitiah Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966): 195. Though the word "innocent" disturbs some, it is used here in the sense of innocence of any wrongdoing as the base for the suffering Job endured, not innocence in the sense of having no sin or culpability as a fallen creation. See Clines, *Job 1–20*, xxxviii, for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley E. Porter, "The Message of the Book of Job: Job 42:7b as Key to Interpretation?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 63 (1991): 151. It would seem that the author of Job had several purposes under the general theme of wisdom's teaching about God and human suffering. While God and His freedom are the major focus of the book, the problem of suffering is the medium through which the book's purpose is presented. Stressing one subject over the other would be unproductive.

<sup>9</sup> Zuck, "Job," 715. "The Book of Job also teaches that to ask why, as Job did (3:11–12, 16, 20), is not wrong. But to demand that God answer why, as Job also did (13:22; 19:7; 31:15) is wrong" (ibid.).

<sup>10</sup> Wesley C. Baker, *More Than a Man Can Take: A Study of Job* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 64–65. This is not to say that a nonbeliever does not struggle with the same questions. But if an unbeliever's questions do not lead to a relationship with God, then they are normally used as excuses for not believing in God and as reasons to dismiss divine claims without struggling with the biblical issues. The believer, however, struggles with the seeming inconsistencies and incongruities, attempting to harmonize these difficulties with faith in what is known of God in His Word.

undeserved suffering, therefore, serves as a dependable, useful model<sup>12</sup> for the believer of any generation in dealing with the problem of theodicy.

Is God to be held to a strict set of regulations based on human interpretations of His relationship with mankind? How does the Book of Job handle this question and its connection with undeserved suffering, while still demanding faith in an omnipotent, sovereign, and loving God? This study suggests several answers from the Book of Job in an attempt to (a) reveal the false theological method of Satan in regard to human suffering, and his role as the cause or “prime mover” of suffering, (b) show how the three counselors, while presenting some truth, follow a retribution<sup>13</sup> or recompense<sup>14</sup> theology as a method of explaining suffering that is related to Satan’s original attack on Job, (c) briefly present Elihu’s answer to Job’s suffering, (d) suggest God’s estimation of Job’s complaint and suffering, that is, a correction of the three counselors and Job himself, and (e) summarize the various lessons Job learned from his suffering.

Job is truly a wisdom book. The basic concept of wisdom has always been connected with skill and “know-how,”<sup>15</sup> for “wisdom was the art of achieving,” and the “emphasis was on competence.”<sup>16</sup> Wisdom (hm;kjj;µk'j;) challenges readers to discover the “know-how” presented in the book so that they might achieve competence in dealing with the questions of suffering. From the Book of Job readers can learn how to challenge the false concepts related to suffering and how to maintain a loving and meaningful relationship, in the midst of suffering, with the sovereign God.

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<sup>12</sup> “By all means let Job the patient be your model so long as that is possible for you; but when equanimity fails, let the grief and anger of Job the impatient direct itself and yourself toward God, for only in encounter with him will the tension of suffering be resolved” (Clines, *Job 1–20*, xxxix).

<sup>13</sup> “Retribution theology” is a term often used to explain the “cursing and blessing” clauses of the Mosaic Covenant. Here it is used mainly to describe a misuse of that theology that attempts to set boundaries on God’s sovereign will and obligate Him to man’s actions and assumptions concerning blessing and cursing. The term is also used to represent a theology that assumes God’s blessing is based on how good a person is or acts and that His cursing is based on how bad a person is or acts. While Israel deserved cursing on many occasions, God’s longsuffering was often extended in grace. Conversely the righteous often suffered along with the unrighteous under the discipline due them, the nation, and its leaders. In Job, Satan and the three counselors tried to limit God and His freedom to act according to their own standards. They saw this concept as a fixed formula for judging the life of an individual and therefore for limiting God to predetermined actions in dealings with people. The biblical idea of blessing and cursing is based on a relationship with God and is primarily internal in nature. The satanic counterfeit of blessing and cursing is based on a relationship with health, other people, and material goods, and is primarily external in nature.

<sup>14</sup> The term “recompense theology” suggests the concept of “payment.” Job’s accusers said God is somehow under obligation to mankind and is confined to giving exact payment to individuals.

<sup>15</sup> L. D. Johnson, *Out of the Whirlwind: The Major Message of the Book of Job* (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Only God “understands the way to [wisdom] and he alone knows where it dwells” (Job 28:23, NIV).

SATANIC MOTIVATION AND METHOD  
AS A CAUSE OF SUFFERING

As Alden points out, blaming the devil for suffering is an all-too-common activity of many Christians.<sup>17</sup> The message of Job deals not with “cause and effect”<sup>18</sup> but with coming to the realization that “nothing happens to us that is not ultimately controlled by the knowledge, love, wisdom, and power of our God of all comfort”<sup>19</sup> (2 Cor. 1:3). Certainly he is correct; however, this principle also often leads to blaming God for suffering. While Satan is the prime mover behind sin, evil, and suffering, it is also correct to point out that one cannot ignore the connection between Satan’s desires and God’s permitting him to carry out those desires. This friction is clearly demonstrated in the terrible troubles inflicted on Job. Satan was the cause, and Job felt the effect. God, however, was also at work in Job’s suffering. But this does not mean God is unconcerned about what happens to His people. “We must admit that God plays in a higher league than we do. His ways are far above our ways. God is greater in intellect, power, and knowledge than we are. So, His ways are usually past our finding out”<sup>20</sup> (Job 28:23; Isa. 55:9). God does inflict suffering directly and indirectly for many different reasons: judgment, discipline, refining, and more, but Satan is behind much of human misery.

The book opens when the Accuser,<sup>21</sup> after traveling throughout the earth, went before the throne of God. Satan challenged Job in three areas: Job’s righteousness, Job’s fear of God, and Job’s separation from sin (Job 1:8–11). Why does Job live righteously, fear God, and separate himself from sin? Satan alleged that Job fears God only because God protects and prospers him.<sup>22</sup> The prosperity issue and its resultant retribution/recompense theology become a major focus in understanding suffering throughout the book (1:9–10; 2:4; 5:19–26; 8:6–7; 11:17–19; 13:15–16; 17:5; 20:21–22; 22:21; 24:1–12; 34:9; 36:11, 16; 42:10). The presentation of this false theology is therefore found in Satan’s statements before the throne of God (chaps. 1–2), Job’s lament (chap. 3), and the three dialogue cycles involving Eliphaz and Job, Bildad and Job, and Zophar and Job (chaps. 4–31). The monologues of Elihu

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<sup>17</sup> Robert L. Alden, *Job*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Alden, *Job*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 14.

<sup>21</sup> “The Accuser” (ʿf;C;h) occurs fourteen times in eleven verses (Job 1:6–9, 12; 2:1–4, 6–7), always with the definite article.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *Out of the Whirlwind*, 25.

(chaps. 32–37)<sup>23</sup> and the speeches of God (chaps. 38–42) present a correction to this theology.

Ancient Israelites<sup>24</sup> and others of the ancient Near East<sup>25</sup> viewed suffering under the rubric of retribution/recompense theology.<sup>26</sup> This theology is challenged by Job's own personal struggle with this faulty theology.

If Job accepted Satan's false theology, as presented in the dialogues, and "repented" under false pretenses, then Satan would have proved his case in the court of heaven. When Satan asked, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" he implied Job served God for "something," that is, some reward. If Job confessed some nonexistent sin so he could return to his former prosperous and healthy status, then Satan's premise in 1:9–10 and 2:4 would be substantiated. Also God Himself would be deemed guilty of blessing Job's deception and falsehood and therefore would be at fault.

Satan's accusation was directed toward both God's justice and Job's righteousness. Satan basically asked the question, Is it love or is it self-serving greed that motivates a person to be righteous, to fear God, and to be

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<sup>23</sup> A presentation of the differing views on the authenticity, placement, structure, and purpose of the Elihu speeches can be found in David Allen Diewert, "The Composition of the Elihu Speeches: A Poetic and Structural Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1991), 1–23. See also Helen H. Nichols, "The Composition of the Elihu Speeches (Job, Chaps. 32–37)," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 27 (1910–1911): 97–186; Matthias H. Stuhlmann, *Hiob. Ein religiöses Gedicht aus dem Hebräischen neu übersetzt, geprüft und erläutert* (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1804), 14–24, 40–44; and Gary W. Martin, "Elihu and the Third Cycle in the Book of Job" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1972), 51.

<sup>24</sup> "The classical Judaic tradition toward suffering is expressed in the Talmudic-Midrashic writings. God is seen as the One who punishes the wicked, as well as the One who brings good and rewards the righteous. Job is considered by some exegetes to be a Jew while others believe that he never existed as a person but was merely an example. Other talmudic writers thought God rebuked Job for his lack of patience when suffering was inflicted on Job; still others excused his outbursts because they were uttered under duress" (Buddy R. Pipes, "Christian Response to Human Suffering: A Lay Theological Response to the Book of Job" [D.Min. project, Drew University, 1981], 10).

<sup>25</sup> There is evidence of this concept in ancient Near Eastern literature and in the Old Testament (see Bildad's appeal to "tradition" in Job 8:11–22 and the many parallels in the Book of Proverbs and the Psalms). That this was a general viewpoint of ancient peoples can be seen in the parallels between ancient wisdom texts and the Book of Job (Gregory W. Parsons, "A Biblical Theology of Job 38:1–42:6" [Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980], 19–54). See James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 418–19, 589–91, 597; and W. G. Lambert, "The Babylonian Theodicy," in *The Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 71–89, especially page 75, lines 70–71. "The Mesopotamian texts dealing with the problem of the righteous sufferer give one a glimpse of the intellectual tradition within which the book of Job fits. It is a long tradition that includes an early Sumerian composition and an Old Babylonian Akkadian text. Its most elaborate literary expressions, however, are found in the long poem 'I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom' (*Ludlul bel nemeqi*) and 'The Babylonian Theodicy,' a text constructed in the form of a cycle of dialogues between the righteous sufferer and a friend" (James Luther Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* [New York: Harper and Row, 1988], 36).

<sup>26</sup> Clines, *Job 1–20*, xxxix–xxxx. Also see Nahum Glatzer, *The Dimensions of Job* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 1–18. Glatzer discusses the differing views of Talmudic-Midrashic tradition in relation to Job.

separate from sin? Satan wrongly assumed that since God protected and blessed Job, greed was the foundation of his righteousness rather than Job's personal intimate relationship based on love, trust, and fear of God (1:8–10; 2:3). Traditional wisdom<sup>27</sup> reasoned that since God is in control of the world and because He is just, the only way wise people can maintain faith in Him is to see all blessing as evidence of goodness and righteousness and all suffering as evidence of unrighteousness and sin.<sup>28</sup> Johnson correctly calls this viewpoint “pragmatic religion” and an “insidious heresy.”<sup>29</sup> Belief in God and subsequent service to Him would then be reduced to a prosperity/pragmatic religious formula or system of works.

After the first two chapters, Satan is noticeably absent from the story. His presence was no longer a factor, but his assumptions, accusations, and theology are still evident throughout the dialogue. In the fabric of retribution/recompense theology, expressed by the three friends who interacted with Job, Satan's purpose was to see God's highest creation curse Him. Satan's objective was to turn a righteous man against the just God (1:11).

It is interesting that God's charge against Satan, “You incited me against him to ruin him without any reason” (2:3b, NIV), is a horrifying, yet enlightening look into the character of Satan. Humanity means no more to the Accuser than a vehicle for cursing God.

#### THE THREE FRIENDS' FALSE THEOLOGY OF RETRIBUTION/RECOMPENSE

Job's three counselors perpetuated the same satanic false doctrine of retribution/recompense. They held that the righteous never suffer and the unrighteous always do. Each friend had his own approach to Job's problem, yet they shared this theology of retribution/recompense. Therefore their proposed solution was the same: “Repent of your sins so God can restore your prosperity.” Or, more directly, “If you want your health, family, and prosperity back, accept our evaluation, admit to sin and wrongdoing.”

The avowed objective of the three friends was “to sympathize with him and comfort him” (2:11). But this objective was never achieved (except for the first seven days when their silent presence may have been of some comfort to Job). A short summary of the speeches of these men reveals this fact.

After Job lamented his birth (chap. 3), Eliphaz began the three cycles of debate (chaps. 4–31). His speeches are recorded in chapters 4–5, 15, and 22. Eliphaz's questions immediately revealed his theology, “Who ever perished

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<sup>27</sup> “Traditional wisdom” refers here to what is contrary to God's wisdom (Matt. 15:3, 6; Mark 7:3, 5, 13; Col. 2:8).

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Out of the Whirlwind*, 17–18.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

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being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed?” (4:7). However, experience and history, Job said, show that many innocent persons have suffered (24:1–12). Job himself, he said, is an example. Yet based on a wrong premise Eliphaz sought to convict Job of his “foolish” response to misfortune and to urge him to lay his sin before God (5:8; 15:20–35; 22:5–12). His basic message was that Job must be sinning because he was suffering (4:12–5:16; 15:2–5, 20–35; 22:5–15). Without the benefit of knowing the unseen events of chapter 1, Eliphaz saw God as both the initiator and reliever of suffering (Job 5:18). Therefore Eliphaz wanted Job to see that God’s oppression resulted from the patriarch’s many presumed sins (15:11–16, 20; 22:5–11). Once Job admitted his sin, God would heal Job and his prosperity would return (22:21).

When Job said to his friends, “If I have sinned, show me” (6:24; cf. 7:20–21), Bildad took up the challenge (chaps. 8, 18, 25), and in his first speech he appealed to traditional wisdom (“inquire of past generations, and consider the things searched out by their fathers,” 8:8). Bildad correctly asserted that God is not unjust or unfair (8:2–3). But Bildad was wrong in saying that Job was totally at fault and needed to repent before he could be restored (8:4–7). God would be unfair to allow undeserved suffering to come to a righteous man. Job’s insistence on innocence was an affront to the justice and rightness of God (8:3, 20). Bildad frankly told Job he was evil and that he must repent so that God could bring back his laughter, joy, and peace (8:21–22, a cruel reminder of Job’s losses). According to Bildad, Job was suffering because of sin; and according to the principle of retribution/recompense, Job deserved to be punished. Because Job refused to accept this principle, Bildad said the patriarch did not know God and had been rejected by Him (8:4; 18:5–21). Therefore how could Job claim to be righteous when the evidence against him was so strong (25:4–6)?

Zophar continued the attack on Job’s righteousness and integrity (11:2–4), fear of God (vv. 5–6), and morality (vv. 6, 14). Claiming to have a superior understanding of God and His wisdom, Zophar said Job was too superficial to understand the deeper things of God (vv. 7–12). This third agitator stated that God had even overlooked some of Job’s sins (v. 6). While Job admitted that God was the source of his suffering (12:14–25), he insisted that he had committed no sin commensurate with his suffering (chap. 31).<sup>30</sup>

While it is true that God’s wisdom, as Zophar said, is unfathomable (11:7–9), this was not the issue in Job’s situation. Satan’s original faulty premise was repeated by Zophar: If Job were good, he would prosper; but since he suffers, he must be evil and will die (vv. 13–20). Zophar accused Job of wickedness (20:6), pride (v. 6), perishing like dung (v. 7), and oppressing the poor (v. 19). Like the other two antagonists, Zophar spoke of the wicked person’s loss of prosperity (vv. 15, 18, 20–22). He hoped this

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<sup>30</sup> For an excellent discussion of Job 31, see Pipes, “Christian Response to Human Suffering,” 1–18.

would establish the premise of traditional wisdom and eventually lead Job to repent.

Job's irritation at the arguments of these three advisers (and at God) can be seen in these paraphrased responses: "When will your arguments end?" (6:14–17). "What have I done to deserve this?" (6:24). "God, just forgive me and get it over with" (7:21). "No matter what I do, nothing changes" (chap. 9). "Why won't You answer me, God?" (10:1–7). "I can't take any more of this!" (14:18–22). "Nobody cares about me!" (19:13–22). "Where can I get some answers?" (28:12). "Everything used to be so perfect" (chap. 29). "What good is it to serve God?" (chap. 30).<sup>31</sup>

Soon after his first calamities, Job worshiped God, saying "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). He "did not sin nor did he blame God" (v. 22). But later, under the pressure of his opponents' accusations and under the weight of his seemingly endless physical and emotional plight, Job said, "For He bruises me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause" (9:17).<sup>32</sup> In his despair Job accused God of being unfair and unjust (vv. 17–20), since he observed that God punishes good people and rewards bad people (vv. 21–24). God does not fit the preconceived claims of traditional wisdom, so as Job became despondent over the brevity of life (vv. 25–26), he sensed that God would never forgive him (vv. 27–31), and he pleaded for a mediator<sup>33</sup> (vv. 32–33). Giving up on that possibility, Job asked God to diminish his suffering so that he could meet God in court and plead his own case (vv. 34–35). Even though Job saw great inconsistencies in the application of the retribution/recompense doctrine by the three antagonists (24:1–12),<sup>34</sup> he concluded that God did not really care for him and that he was caught in some sort of divine entrapment in which God's lovingkindness was absent (10:1–13, 16–17). He lamented his birth (vv. 18–19) and his coming death (vv. 20–22). Captured by false counsel and confused by God's ways, Job was now ready for a true counselor.

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<sup>31</sup> Mark R. Littleton, *When God Seems Far Away: Biblical Insight for Common Depression* (Wheaton, IL: Shaw, 1987), 53–61.

<sup>32</sup> Also see 7:17–21; 9:22–24; 10:3; 12:12–25; 13:21–22; 14:18–22; 16:11, 13; 19:6, 21; 21:23; 27:2; 30:20; and 31:35.

<sup>33</sup> Could this be the role of Elihu in either acting as a mediator or suggesting one? See H. D. Beeby, "Elihu—Job's Mediator?" *Southeast Asian Journal of Theology* 7 (October 1969): 33–54. Other suggestions include Elihu as a "forerunner" to God in chapters 38–42 (Robert Gordis, "Elihu the Intruder," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963], 60–78, and Elihu as arbiter (Norman C. Habel, "The Role of Elihu in the Design of the Book of Job," in *In the Shelter of Elyon*, ed. W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer [Sheffield: JSOT, 1984], 81–98).

<sup>34</sup> The fact that God postpones judgment disproves the theory of the three friends concerning immediate retribution for wrongdoing. "Job is no more out of God's favor as one of the victims than the criminal in vv. 13–17 is in God's favor because of God's inaction" (*The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Kenneth Barker [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985], 759).

THE INTERVENTION OF ELIHU

Elihu began his discourses with a lengthy introduction and expression of anger toward both Job and the three older companions (32:1–10).<sup>35</sup> He felt that both parties had been guilty of perverting divine justice and of misrepresenting God (32:2–3, 11–22). Elihu attempted to correct the friends' and Job's faulty image of God.

Elihu affirmed that God was not silent during Job's suffering (33:14–30). He argued that God is not unjust (34:10–12, 21–28). Furthermore God is neither uncaring (35:15), nor is He powerless to act on behalf of His people (chaps. 36–37). Elihu presented a totally different perspective on suffering from that of the three. He said Job's suffering was not because of past sin, but was designed to keep him from continuing to accept a sinful premise for suffering, to draw him closer to God, to teach him that God is sovereignly in control of the affairs of life, and to show him that God does reward the righteous, but only on the basis of His love and grace.<sup>36</sup> It was as if Elihu were saying, "You insist on justice and righteousness, but do you really want to be treated justly? Have you really considered what would happen if God took you at your word?"<sup>37</sup>

One cannot have a relationship with God as long as one thinks that there is something in oneself which makes one deserve God's friendship—or for that matter, a genuine relationship with another human being on such terms. . . . God never withdraws from the just, no matter what, no matter how deep the frustration, the bitterness, the darkness, the confusion, the pain.<sup>38</sup>

Elihu identified himself with Job. He was a fellow sufferer, not an observer (33:6).<sup>39</sup> He helped Job realize that a relationship with God is not founded on nor maintained by his insistence on loyalty, purity, or righteousness, but is wholly of God's grace. Elihu did not see the primary basis of Job's suffering as sin, though he did not minimize Job's move toward sin in the dialogue (e.g., 34:36–37; 35:16). Among other things suffering, Elihu said, was a preventive measure to keep Job from perpetuating a sinful, false theology. God's sovereign control and freedom of

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<sup>35</sup> Like the reader, Elihu was dismayed, worn down, and tired of the dialogues which had solved nothing. Many have criticized Elihu's lengthy introduction, but both protocol (his youth against the age of the others), local custom, and his exasperation were justly expressed.

<sup>36</sup> Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, 220.

<sup>37</sup> Walter L. Michel, "Job's Real Friend: Elihu," *Criterion* 21 (Spring 1982): 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> "Elihu appeared on the scene. . . . He confesses that he, too, is involved. He admits that Job's problem is humanity's problem and he realizes that Job's question is basically the same as his own. In contrast to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who rejected Job, Elihu identifies with him and speaks to him out of inner solidarity" (Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Living the Questions: The Spirituality of the Religion Teacher," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 [Fall 1976]: 21). Also see Marvin E. Tate, "The Speeches of Elihu," *Review & Expositor* 68 (Fall 1971): 490; and Gordis, "Elihu the Intruder," 62–63.

action over the affairs of Job's life were not restricted by a theological system of retribution/recompense, but were acts of grace and mercy. God therefore rewards the righteous in grace, not because of some human action seeking a deserved response.<sup>40</sup> Job was never the same after his contact with Elihu.

The three counselors intensified their pressure on Job to accept the traditional doctrine of retribution/recompense, thus inflicting greater mental suffering on Job.<sup>41</sup> Acting unknowingly as agents of Satan's philosophy, the three friends increased the suffering of an already hurting man. However, even though Job found inconsistencies with the application of the doctrine, he shared the view of the friends that the world is based on a reward-and-punishment scheme.<sup>42</sup> This position only added to his frustration.

This *quid pro quo* premise was contested by Elihu and shown to be without substance. He prepared Job for God's response to the debates and Job's ultimate submission to His sovereignty. Elihu brought "perspective, clarity, empathy, compassion, and concrete help,"<sup>43</sup> thereby preparing Job for God's words.

#### GOD'S SPEECHES TO JOB

Speaking out of a windstorm, God began by charging Job with darkening His counsel by "words without knowledge" (38:2; as Elihu had said twice [34:35; 35:16]). God did not address Job's suffering directly during this discourse, nor did He answer Job's attacks on His justice. After attempting to find answers to unanswerable problems, Job and his friends were now forced to return to God. God spoke of His sovereignty and omnipotence as demonstrated in the creation of the earth, the sea, the sun, the underworld, light and darkness, the weather, and the heavenly bodies (38:4–38). Animate creation testifies of God's sovereign power and providential compassion: the lion (vv. 39–40), the raven (v. 41), the mountain goat and the deer (39:1–4), the donkey (39:5–8), the ox (39:9–12), the ostrich (39:13–18), the horse (39:19–25), the hawk (39:26), and the eagle or vulture (39:27–30). Then He said to Job, "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it" (40:2). Of course Job could not respond to God's remarks (40:3–5).

The storm motif continued in the second speech (40:6). Job 40:8–14 presents the power of God versus the power of man. God affirmed His justice without defending or explaining it. God said, in essence, that He is and always will be just and fair to His creatures. God alone—not Job, nor the

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<sup>40</sup> Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, 220.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *Out of the Whirlwind*, 30–60.

<sup>42</sup> Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," 97.

<sup>43</sup> Michel, "Job's Real Friend: Elihu," 32.

three friends, and certainly not Satan—administers and regulates justice. “The ode to the behemoth” follows, in which God’s own wisdom poetry stresses His power in opposition to that of man or Satan (40:15–24). The second poem (chap. 41), “the ode to the leviathan,” represents the same essential principles. What the behemoth and the leviathan represent is contested in scholarly circles, but the message is clear: Since man has no power over these creatures, he can find strength and power only in God. God is sovereign, omnipotent, just, loving, and perfectly righteous.<sup>44</sup>

God did not tell Job to repent so that his pain would be explained, or that he would be vindicated, or that his prosperity would be restored. Instead, God brought Job to a face-to-face meeting with Himself. What did Job learn from this encounter?

Perhaps the first thing he discovered concerned the mistaken reason for Job’s quest. The consuming passion for vindication suddenly presented itself as ludicrous once the courageous rebel stood in God’s presence. By maintaining complete silence on this singular issue which had brought Job to a confrontation with his maker, God taught his servant the error in assuming that the universe operated according to a principle of rationality. Once that putative principle of order collapsed before divine freedom, the need for personal vindication vanished as well, since God’s anger and favor show no positive correspondence with human acts of villainy or virtue. Job’s personal experience had taught him that last bit of information, but he had also clung tenaciously to an assumption of order. Faced with a stark reminder of divine freedom, Job finally gave up this comforting claim, which had hardly brought solace in his case.<sup>45</sup>

Then Job repented of his misconception of God, not of any alleged sin on which his three friends had focused.<sup>46</sup> Still, God commended Job, because even in the face of doubt and pressure from false theology, he maintained a personal relationship with Him and brought his doubts directly to Him. Therefore Satan’s hypothesis (1:9–11; 2:3–4) was proven false. Job finally rejected human approaches, the approaches of tradition, logic, and all wisdom that was foreign to what he learned about God and himself. All attempts to explain God and His actions, either logically, historically, or

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<sup>44</sup> Zuck comments, “The behemoth and leviathan have many similarities, so if one is an actual animal, then the other probably is also. As discussed earlier, in the ancient Near East both animals were symbols of chaotic evil. . . . Man cannot subdue single-handedly a hippopotamus or a crocodile, his fellow creatures (40:15). Nor can man conquer evil in the world, which they symbolize. Only God can do that. Therefore Job’s defiant impugning of God’s ways in the moral universe—as if God were incompetent or even evil—was totally absurd and uncalled for” (Zuck, “Job,” 772–73). Also see Roy B. Zuck, *Job*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 180.

<sup>45</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1982), 124–25.

<sup>46</sup> “His emotional world suddenly assumes a different form. The clouds of darkness are dispersed. A feeling of infinite confidence in the world and its Divine Leader arises in his soul and he laughs at the thousand questions, the hungry wolves with burning eyes, and they disappear from his soul” (Chaim Zhitlowsky, “Job and Faust,” in *Two Studies in Yiddish Culture*, ed. Percy Matenko [Leiden: Brill, 1968], 152).

traditionally, failed. Job was left with God and God alone. Job's prosperity was returned only after everyone involved understood that all blessing comes by God's grace alone, not because of an individual's piety nor because of accepting a retribution/recompense theology.

#### CONCLUSION

While God is just, it is wrong to assume that the fallen world, under the rulership of Satan, is fair. The failure of traditional wisdom to answer Job's complaint reveals that the world operates by the plan of a fallen being, and only by a personal relationship with God can fallen humanity find meaning and purpose within the injustices of the world. Satan, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and to some extent Job wrongly assumed that punishment of the wicked and reward of the righteous in this life is a fixed doctrine. But this limits God's freedom. For example in retribution/recompense theology, rain was often seen as a reward, or if rain were withheld that was viewed as punishment. Here, however, "the phenomenon is shown not to be a vehicle of morality at all—the moral purpose ascribed to it just does not exist (38:25–27)."<sup>47</sup> Rain falls by the grace of God on both the righteous and wicked (Matt. 5:45).

Is it not conceivable that God wanted to show that neither man's piety nor his sin affects how God administers His plan? Did He not then, and does He not now, administer that plan by grace? As Tsevat wrote, "Job behaved piously throughout, but his behavior had, in the narrated time of 1:13–31:40, no consequences compatible with the accepted idea of reward and punishment."<sup>48</sup> His hope had been in the positive results of a false doctrine, while his friends had extolled the negative aspects of that same doctrine. First Elihu (chaps. 32–37) and then God (chaps. 38–41) stated that these misplaced hopes of retribution/recompense have no place in the divine economy. In fact in his final replies (40:3–5; 42:2–3, 5–6) "Job acknowledges this fact and is now prepared for a pious and moral life uncluttered by false hopes and unfounded claims."<sup>49</sup>

This is not to say that the Book of Job teaches that a person has no obligation to moral and righteous living nor to a commitment to truth and justice in the face of sin and evil. What it does say, at least in large part, is that the believer has an obligation to examine his motivation in coming to and serving God, especially during times of trial and suffering. Furthermore the Book of Job does not support the mistaken idea that all suffering is for discipline or that suffering always results from sin and evil. God does discipline, teach, guide, and direct through suffering, but He cannot be

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<sup>47</sup> Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," 100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

manipulated by a manmade system of blessing and cursing—a system negatively called the theology of retribution/recompense or positively labeled the theology of prosperity. God is not obligated to man under any conditions. Once this is understood, believers are free to examine their suffering on the basis of God’s grace. All saints share in the “fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). “That the Lord Himself has embraced and absorbed the undeserved consequences of all evil is the final answer to Job and to all the Jobs of humanity. As an innocent sufferer, Job is the companion of God.”<sup>50</sup>

The question, “Why do the righteous suffer?” cannot be clarified by only one answer. The many reasons given in Scripture for personal suffering<sup>51</sup> must all be examined in light of God’s grace. Job was righteous because he had a grace relationship with the Righteous One, not because he had earned it. Job responded with humility and godly fear of God’s sovereignty (42:1–2), he acknowledged God’s inscrutability (v. 3), reflected on His superiority (v. 4), refocused on God’s intimacy (v. 5), and repented of

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<sup>50</sup> Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, 73.

<sup>51</sup> The most common examples are these: (1) Suffering is used to test and teach (Wilkinson and Boa, *Talk Thru the Old Testament*, 1:145). The focus is on what Job learned from suffering, not suffering itself. Suffering therefore teaches believers to look to future glory, to be obedient, to learn patience, to be sympathetic to others who suffer, to live a life of faith, to understand God’s gracious purposes, to abide in Christ, to pray, to be sensitive to sin, to love God, to draw closer to the Scriptures, to learn contentment, and more (George Washington Oestreich, “The Suffering of Believers under Grace” [Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1944], 42). (2) Some hold that no answer is given to the problem of undeserved suffering. God is so great that if an answer were given, one could not understand it (David M. Howard, *How Come, God? Reflections from Job about God and Puzzled Man* [Philadelphia: Holman, 1972], 114). (3) Others state that the sufferer is honored by God to “demonstrate the meaning of full surrender” and to demonstrate the New Testament principle of Romans 8:28 (Archer, *The Book of Job*, 18). (4) Suffering is given for the purpose of preventing one from becoming arrogant (2 Cor. 12:7–10). (5) Suffering demonstrates that God is absolutely sovereign and can do with His creatures whatever He pleases (Parsons, “A Biblical Theology of Job 38:1–42:6,” 151), with focus on the “sovereign grace of God and man’s response of faith and submissive trust” (ibid.). Littleton also seems to see this as the answer (*When God Seems Far Away*). (6) Another approach simply suggests, “What cannot be comprehended through reason must be embraced in love” (Alden, *Job*, 41). (7) “Knowing the answer to the question who, Job no longer needs to ask the question why” (David L. McKenna, *Job*, Communicator’s Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1986], 315). “Job did not receive explanations regarding his problems; but he did come to a much deeper sense of the majesty and loving care of God” (Zuck, “Job,” 776). (8) Suffering is often given for disciplinary purposes (William Bode, *The Book of Job and the Solution of the Problem of Suffering It Offers* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1914], 210–17). (9) Suffering is a tempering process (Oestreich, “The Suffering of Believers under Grace,” 57). (10) Some see undeserved suffering as providing the opportunity for the exercise of faith (ibid., 50). First Peter 5:10 supports this view, as well as Romans 8:35–39. (11) Suffering is a testimony to others of the believer’s love and faithfulness to God (ibid., 54). (12) There is also a sense in which believers suffer by being a part of God’s family (ibid., 66–71). (13) Believers often suffer because of the invisible war that is waged beyond human vision (Job 1–2). (14) God is glorified and honored by the testimony of the believer in the invisible court proceedings in heaven (Job 1–2). (15) Suffering makes believers acutely aware of the power of evil, strips them of all their worldly securities, allows them to see Christ in His glory, and enables them to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Littleton, *When God Seems Far Away*, 116).

serving God from wrong motivation (v. 6).<sup>52</sup> So why did God put Job through all of his suffering? Primarily it was

to reveal Himself to Job. . . . Through this interrogation, God has taught Job that He alone created everything—the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them—and He alone controls all that He created. He alone has the right to do with His own as He pleases. He is under no obligation to explain His actions to His creation. He alone is sovereign and unaccountable to anyone.<sup>53</sup>

However, the purpose of the Book of Job should not be limited to an expression of God's sovereignty. Can a community of suffering saints find other answers and applications here? Yes, because Job's struggle and ultimate triumph gives those who suffer much more to apply. The following sixteen truths may be gained from the Book of Job.

1. God is not to be limited to a preconceived notion of retribution/recompense theology.
2. Sin is not always the basis for suffering.
3. Accepting false tenets about suffering can cause one to blame and challenge God.
4. A retributive/recompensive theology distorts God's ways and confines Him to human standards of interpretation.
5. Satan is behind this false concept and delights in using it to afflict the righteous.
6. The devil's world is unfair and unjust, and even though people may misunderstand the ways of God and the "why's" of life, having a personal relationship with God is the only way one can know justice.
7. Life is more than a series of absurdities and unexplainable pains that simply must be endured. Instead life for believers is linked with God's unseen purpose.
8. People do not always know all the facts, nor is such knowledge necessary for living a life of faith.
9. God's wisdom is above human wisdom.
10. God's blessings are based solely on grace, not on a traditional, legalistic formula.
11. Suffering can be faced with faith and trust in a loving, gracious God even when there is no immediately satisfying logical or rational reason to do so.
12. God does allow suffering, pain, and even death, if they best serve His purposes.
13. Prosperity theology has no place in God's grace plan.
14. Suffering can have a preventive purpose.
15. The greatest of saints struggle with the problem of undeserved suffering and will continue to do so.

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<sup>52</sup> Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, 245–48.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

16. Because God's people are intimately related to Him, suffering is often specifically designed to glorify God in the unseen war with Satan.

Satan, who attacked Job in Job 1–2, was silenced in chapter 42 because Job's response (42:1–6) proved that God's confidence in him was not unfounded (1:8; 2:3). Though God needs no vindication, the Book of Job shows that undeserved suffering, accepted and borne by a child of God, does in a sense vindicate God's grace plan for His saints. "True wisdom, like God, defies human reason."<sup>54</sup> Therefore true wisdom defies the wrong concepts of traditional wisdom, and, when properly applied by God's people during undeserved suffering, it becomes a living demonstration of God's grace and a believer's faith. "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee" (42:5).

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<sup>54</sup> Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 123.