



Healing and Silence in the Epilogue of Job

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Teaching the book of Job to undergraduates at a large public university presents a number of challenges. Yet the biggest challenge that I have encountered is not one that we ever discussed in graduate school. It is not explaining the book's overarching theological message or its date of composition or even particular idiomatic phrases or words in the poetry. Rather, the biggest challenge for me is coming up with an engaging and thought-provoking discussion question that will provide a point of entry into this particularly dense book. Considering the wide range of possible questions that the book of Job provokes, choosing a question with which to start class can quickly become an overwhelming task.

On more than one occasion, I have found that the television show *The Simpsons* helps with these types of pedagogical difficulties. When teaching Job, I often begin class with a clip from a *Simpsons* episode entitled "Hurricane Neddy."¹ In this episode, Ned Flanders has his home destroyed by a hurricane and his business looted by an angry mob. These events throw Ned into a theological crisis, because he is by far the most pious character on *The Simpsons*. Ned approaches his pastor, named Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, and asks, "Reverend Lovejoy, with all that's

¹"Hurricane Neddy," season 8, episode 8 of *The Simpsons* (original air date: December 29, 1996).

Although Job's skin diseases play an important role in the book's prologue and dialogues, they are not mentioned in the epilogue. Apparently, the epilogue's restoration applies to Job's possessions and children. Since Job's disfigurement remains, the book refuses a connection between disease and wrongdoing.

happened to us [Ned's family] today I kind of feel like Job... Reverend... I need to know, is God punishing me?!!" Reverend Lovejoy's qualified response seems especially hollow: "Short answer yes with an if; long answer no with a but."

In the next scene, Ned tells himself, "In my darkest hour I can turn to the good book." As he opens the church Bible, however, he gets a paper cut on its gilded edges. At a near breaking point, he cries out, "Why me Lord? Where have I gone wrong? I've always been nice to people. I don't drink or dance or swear. I even kept kosher just to be on the safe side. I've done everything the Bible says, even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff, what more can I do! I... I... feel like I'm coming apart here. I want to yell out but I... I just can't dang diddly do dang damn diddly dern do it." While watching this clip with my class, I ask them to consider whether Ned is trying to find an explanation for his pain or a way of articulating his pain. He begins by asking his pastor whether his recent misfortunes result from a divine punishment but is later reduced to string of nonsensical jabbering when trying to yell out to God. I suggest to my students that we might ask a similar question about the character of Job.

Interestingly enough, after using this strategy to frame class discussions of Job on a number of occasions, I found that our conversations usually return to an extended discussion of how Job and his (so-called) friends approach Job's skin diseases inflicted by "the satan" (2:7). Throughout our discussions, we discovered that although Job's friends call attention to his diseased skin as evidence of his wrongdoing, Job calls attention to his diseased skin as evidence of his pain. In this essay, I expand on what I have learned in my class discussions. I propose that the unusual silence in the epilogue of Job (42:7–17) regarding any healing of Job's skin diseases undermines the friends' rhetorical connections between diseased skin and wrongdoing.

I begin by showing that Job's skin diseases play a major role in both the prologue (chs. 1–2) and the dialogues (3:1–42:6). Thus, their absence in the epilogue becomes more conspicuous. Then, I examine how the various parties (the friends, Job, and God) approach Job's diseased skin to support their various positions. I conclude by briefly investigating the implications of this discussion of his diseased skin for theological reflections on health, healing, and wellness.

DISEASED SKIN IN THE PROLOGUE AND DIALOGUES OF JOB

Job's skin diseases play an important role in the prologue (Job 1–2) and the dialogues (Job 3:1–42:6). Thus, it seems odd that the epilogue never mentions them. The epilogue (42:12–13) discusses the restoration of the possessions and children that Job lost (1:13–19) as a result of the first wager made between God and the satan (1:6–9). Yet, it is the second wager, resulting in Job's skin diseases, that serves as the actual catalyst for the dialogues (2:7). Presumably, due to these skin diseases, Job's friends do not recognize him when they see him initially (2:12). The prologue ends with the friends focusing on the physical pain resulting from Job's

skin diseases (2:13; the Hebrew word translated “suffering” in this verse refers to physical pain in Gen 34:25; Job 5:18 [“wounds”]; 14:22). These skin diseases, rather than the loss of his children or his possessions, provide the major catalyst for the discussions in the following chapters. Furthermore, with the possible but unlikely exceptions of 8:4 and 19:17, Job and his friends never mention the loss of his children or possessions in their discussion. By contrast, the motif of “diseased skin” appears repeatedly throughout these chapters. Thus, it seems reasonable to ask why the skin diseases are not healed in the epilogue that otherwise details Job’s restoration (42:12–13).

Ancient interpreters seem to have noticed this strange silence as well. After all, the lack of Job’s healing provides a striking contrast to the healing of the apocryphal character Tobit, since their respective stories contain similar themes. In addition to living in prosperity following his ordeal, Tobit receives a detailed physical restoration (11:10–15). According to a Greek version of Job, Job lived one hundred and seventy years “after his plague” (42:16). This phrase may suggest an attempt to make a physical restoration more explicit than in the Hebrew version, which lacks this phrase. The Greek version uses the same term (*plēgē*) to translate the Hebrew word for “suffering” in 2:13 (although we could translate the Greek word *plēgē* as “affliction” or “ordeal,” as well as “plague” or “wound”). According to the pseudepigraphic book *Testament of Job*, special cords given to Job by God restore and even enhance his body once he girds his loins with them (cf. Job 38:3). Once Job puts them on, the worms and plagues disappear from his body (cf. Job 7:5). He becomes as strong as if he did not suffer at all, and he forgets the pains of his heart (*Testament of Job* 47:5–8). By detailing the restoration of Job’s body, the *Testament of Job* draws attention to a silence in the biblical book that more recent scholarship overlooks.² Although it may seem overly speculative to discuss why an unknown author does not address a particular matter, scholars often discuss reasons for other textual silences in the epilogue of Job and suggest that the silences make a literary contribution to the book. For example, a number of scholars attempt to explain why the satan does not appear in the epilogue after playing a prominent role in the prologue.³ Occasionally, they note that Job’s wife does not reappear in the

²C. L. Seow provides a rare exception. He states, “Job’s fortune is restored, but no mention is made of the healing of his disease” (“Study Notes for Job,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001] 773). Unfortunately, the format for these study notes does not allow Seow space to elaborate on this comment.

³For representative examples, see, among others, William Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 58, n. 3; Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978) 576; Norman Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1985) 585; Yair Hoffman, *A Blemished Perfection: The Book of Job in Context* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 162–163; J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1985) 262; Carol Newsom, “The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 12 vols., ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 4:348; Kenneth Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the ‘Happy’ Ending in Job 42:7–17* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005) 86, n. 293; Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 207, n. 39.

epilogue.⁴ Yet, one key silence in the epilogue, a healing of Job's skin diseases, remains largely neglected. To understand the impact that this curious silence has on the book's theological landscape, we should consider how the various parties employ skin-disease imagery in order to express their various positions throughout the book.

JOB'S FRIENDS: SKIN DISEASE AND WRONGDOING

Job's skin becomes a continuous topic of discussion throughout the dialogues. For example, Bildad connects diseased skin with the wicked when urging Job to admit to his wrongdoing. In 18:13, Bildad describes the wicked as follows: "By disease their skin is consumed, the firstborn of Death consumes their limbs." Bildad implies that Job's diseased skin serves as a sign of his wrongdoing.

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We find a similar connection made by Zophar earlier in the book. In 10:15, Job complains that even if he remains in the right, he cannot lift his head because of his affliction. In response, Zophar argues that Job appears guilty of wrongdoing and deserves punishment. Zophar nearly claims to speak for God. He tells Job, "For you say, 'My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight.' But oh, that God would speak, and open his lips to you" (11:4–5). Zophar seems confident that he knows what God would say about the matter. He even instructs Job on how to pray. He exhorts Job, "If you direct your heart rightly, you will stretch out your hands toward him. If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and do not let wickedness reside in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face *without blemish*" (11:13–15a; emphasis added). Zophar claims that through prayer and ridding himself of wickedness, Job can lift his face unblemished.⁵ He implies a connection between Job's physical condition and his wrongdoing. As Carol Newsom observes, "For Zophar... it is not a matter of the vindication of Job but of the healing of Job, as the accompanying phrase 'without blemish' suggests.... Thus, graphically, Zophar describes Job as lifting up a face no longer disfigured by sin."⁶ Like Zophar, Eliphaz accuses Job of great wrongdoing and gives him advice on how to pray. Eliphaz even uses Zophar's image of lifting one's face when he tells Job, "If the Almighty is your gold and your precious silver, then you will delight yourself in the Almighty, and lift up your face to God. You will pray to him, and he will hear you, and you will pay your vows" (22:25–27; cf. 8:5–6).

⁴See, among others, Ngwa, *Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending*, 86.

⁵The language of directing one's heart appears as an idiom for sacrifice, prayer, or repentance in 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Chr 30:19; and later rabbinic texts (cf. Babylonian Talmud *Berakot* 17a). Several scholars have noted the irony that the friends who had encouraged Job to pray throughout the dialogues require Job's prayer on their behalf in the epilogue. See Ngwa, *Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending*, 107, and the scholars that he cites there.

⁶Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction," 421.

In addition to the three friends, Elihu gives Job advice regarding prayer in chapter 33 (although he does not use the idiom of “lifting one’s face” until 34:19 [“shows no partiality” in NRSV]). In chapter 33, Elihu accuses Job of wrongdoing and describes the offender as a person in great physical pain. As with Zophar, Elihu claims to know how God speaks (v. 14). He reinforces the connection between diseased skin and wrongdoing by describing the offender as follows: “Their flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen; and their bones, once invisible, now stick out” (v. 21). Then, Elihu describes how an angel will advocate for the offender and call for his physical rejuvenation: “let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor” (v. 25). Following the angel’s advocacy, the offender prays to God and receives restoration in verse 26. With this analogy, Job once again receives promises of physical restoration and instructions on prayer.

JOB: HIS SKIN AND HIS PAIN

Like his friends, Job uses images of diseased skin repeatedly. In 31:7–8, Job argues rhetorically, “If my step has turned aside from the way, and my heart has followed my eyes, and if any spot [literally: “blemish”] has clung to my hands; then let me sow, and another eat; and let what grows for me be rooted out.” We should note that Job does not challenge a popular connection between blemishes and wrongdoing. After all, Job’s disease as described in 2:7b (“loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head”) seems very similar to the threatened punishment for disobedience in Deut 28:35b (“grievous boils [same Hebrew words translated above as ‘loathsome sores’] of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head”). Rather, Job simply denies that this connection applies in his specific case. According to Rebecca Raphael, Job’s diseased body is “a sight of contested descriptions: who articulates the disabled body and its meanings? . . . The friends insist on a moral meaning to Job’s suffering, and Job says that there is none.”⁷ Job views himself as an exception to his friends’ theological logic.

Instead, Job often uses imagery of diseased skin to help him express and articulate his pain rather than his wrongdoing. Whether he intends a literal description or a metaphorical image in 7:5, Job states, “My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out again.” In 19:20, he says, “My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.” In 30:30, Job declares, “My skin turns black and falls from me, and my bones burn with heat.” At certain points, Job demands an explanation for his present circumstance (for example, 7:20; 13:23). Yet, when he mentions his skin or flesh, he does so to express his circumstances and inspire those who hear of it, including God, to be with him.

⁷Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008) 102, 103.

GOD: PRAYER AND RESTORATION IN THE EPILOGUE

We have seen that both the friends (including Elihu) and Job use images of diseased skin repeatedly. Yet, whereas the friends use it as evidence of Job's wrongdoing, Job uses it as evidence of his pain. As Edward L. Greenstein writes, "Job's epistemology is, then, the opposite of his friends. Their world view is theoretical and abstract, while his is felt in the bone. While they stumble in attempting to apply a general, traditional doctrine to the specific case of Job, he relies on what he personally knows and interprets the workings of the world in the light of his experience."⁸ Job and his friends appear to be talking past each other on this point. The epilogue's silence regarding any healing may help us move beyond this impasse.

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Like Job's friends, God offers an opinion on speaking for God and connects this opinion with instructions on how Job should pray. Yet, unlike the friends, God does not connect prayer to a promise of Job's physical restoration. Rather, Job must pray for God not to take action against his friends. In contrast to God's silence regarding Job's skin disease, God repeatedly states that the friends did not speak rightly for God as Job has (42:7, 8). Thus, God instructs them to offer sacrifices and to have Job pray for his friends rather than himself (42:8–9). This implies that, among other things, they were wrong when they lectured Job on what his prayer would accomplish. Contrary to what his friends suggested, prayer in the epilogue has nothing to do with a physical restoration.

Instead, the epilogue expresses restoration through the very topic that the friends neglect to discuss throughout the dialogues: possessions and children. After the friends do as God instructs regarding sacrifices and prayer, the narrator reports, "The LORD accepted Job's prayer [literally: 'lifted up Job's face']. And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before" (vv. 9b–10). The friends suggest correctly that Job's prayer would lead to restoration and "a lifting of Job's face." Yet, God restores Job's possessions and children, not his skin.⁹ Healed skin does not comfort Job in the epilogue. Rather, family members with possessions comfort him (v. 11). God's actions seem to reinforce this point when God increases Job's possessions and family in the following verses (vv. 12–13). One of the biggest ironies of the book of Job is that, in the end, God explicitly restores everything that Job lost in the prologue, *except* for his physical health as the friends had antici-

⁸Edward L. Greenstein, "'On My Skin and in My Flesh': Personal Experience as a Source of Knowledge in the Book of Job," in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller*, ed. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Daniel M. Sharon (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007) 76.

⁹Although unlikely, the narrator may imply a vicarious physical restoration for Job when in 42:15a he reports, "In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters."

pated. Contrary to Zophar in 11:15, prayer does not allow Job to lift his own face unblemished. In fact, Job never lifts his own face at all. Rather, God, not Job, lifts Job's presumably still-blemished face after Job prays for his friends.¹⁰

God's silence regarding the skin diseases in the epilogue undermines the friends' repeated connection between disease and wrongdoing in the dialogues. Their connection does not apply in Job's case, as shown by the fact that his skin diseases presumably remain even after God lifts his face and vindicates him. Ultimately, calling attention to diseased skin does not reveal Job's wrongdoing. Calling attention to diseased skin reveals his pain.

Other scholars have read the epilogue's silences regarding the satan or Job's wife as serving meaningful rhetorical purposes. In keeping with this line of thought, I have interpreted the epilogue's silence regarding Job's skin diseases in a similar fashion. Earlier, I quoted Reverend Lovejoy's particularly unsatisfying answer to whether God punishes the righteous: "Short answer yes with an if; long answer no with a but." Even in the world of *The Simpsons*, this qualified explanation seems hollow. Like many of the issues raised by Job and his friends, God offers no explanation for Job's physical pain. While God vindicates Job as speaking rightly about God, God offers no healing. Despite his friends' counsel, righteous words do not translate into a healthy body. Yet, they do get others, even God, to notice Job's pain and, when they hear of it, come and join him (42:11; cf. 2:11). Job's articulation of his circumstances, a major component of his "righteous" speech, produces no explanation for his diseases. Instead, it produces action from others. As Jon D. Levenson observes, "Those who want the book of Job to offer a theodicy have missed the point as badly as [Job's friends], who offer several. It is true that God never provides Job with an intellectually satisfying justification of his suffering. But in the book as we now have it, he does finally end his silence.... What the sufferer wants is not an explanation but a prescription, something that he can *do* to reactivate God after this painful quiescence."¹¹ In the end, a theological discussion that reactivates others, be it humanity (42:11) or divinity (42:12–13), is no small thing. The book of Job reminds us how hollow a theological discussion of health, healing, and wellness can sound if it does not inspire action from those who hear of it. ⊕

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¹⁰Job anticipates the epilogue on this point. In 13:7–8, he responds to Zophar, "Will you speak falsely for God, and speak deceitfully for him? Will you show partiality toward him [literally: "lift his face"], will you plead the case for God?"

¹¹Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) xviii (emphasis original).