



# Job as a Theologian of the Cross

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Job, I believe, can be called a theologian of the cross. But how so? What does this mean? First, two caveats. I am an Old Testament theologian, not a systematic theologian. I do not consider myself an expert on the theology of the cross. That said, as a Christian, I do believe that understanding that God works through the cross for our salvation is key to knowing who God is and how God works with us and for us. Scripture, taken as a whole, points us to a God who works through suffering rather than through glory. Second, let me note, however, that the crucifixion ought never be reduced to an abstraction. Jesus died on the cross for our salvation and for the reconciliation of the whole world to God. The cross is not simply an idea about how God works. I do not wish in this article or in my teaching more broadly ever to diffuse this reality.

Of course, the writer of Job knew nothing of the crucifixion of Jesus. But he (or perhaps she) certainly knew something of God. And what this writer knew points to how God is most truly revealed to us through suffering in ways that lead us inevitably to the cross of Jesus. I like to imagine that Job was one of the central books Jesus explicated on the road to Emmaus when he asked the question, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:26–27).

*Through his odd encounter with God, Job is transformed from an earlier worldview, shared by his friends, that suffering is related to behavior, to what will later be called a theology of the cross, within which Job speaks truthfully to God rather than protectively about God.*

## A THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS?

So why would I call Job a theologian of the cross? Consider two salient facts: First, Job suffers. In the prologue we watch as the arenas in which Job suffers multiply. He loses his possessions. He loses his children. He loses his health. More than merely losing his health, he is struck by a skin disease (thought by many to be what the Bible calls “leprosy”) that would make him ritually unclean.<sup>1</sup> These external manifestations of his suffering are matched by sufferings of another sort, perhaps more “abstract” but no less real. Job loses the support of his wife and his friends. He loses his standing in the community. Most importantly, he loses his confidence and trust in everything he knows and believes about God.

Second, the reality of Job’s sufferings is intimately connected to how Job thinks and how he relates to, talks about, and prays to God. As the prologue makes very clear, especially in the conversations between God and Satan,<sup>2</sup> issues of suffering are intimately connected to issues of behavior and piety (and this is key to the book). In chapter 1, after God brags to Satan about Job’s exemplary behavior, Satan replies, “Does Job fear God for nothing (לֹא־בְרִיָּה)? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land” (1:9–10). Here the issue is unselfish piety. Does Job—does anyone—worship God for nothing (לֹא־בְרִיָּה), without wanting something in return? What makes the relationship of humans to God tick? As Satan rightly observes, God’s invitation to “consider my servant Job” implies that true piety involves righteous behavior and proper “fear of the Lord” (1:8). Satan’s response raises the question of why any of us ever worship and fear God. Do we not want something in return? Along with this question stands another set of questions: What would true fear of God look like? What does true prayer look like? What attitude does one who is truly pious have toward God and experience?

The second conversation between God and Satan occurs in chapter 2:

The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason (לֹא־בְרִיָּה).” (2:3)

Here the issue is undeserved suffering. Job didn’t deserve his suffering, but the devil made God do it! The assumption is that suffering is related to deserving, that deserving is related to behavior, and that some suffering is deserved.

The presence in both exchanges of the Hebrew לֹא־בְרִיָּה, “for no reason,” shows that these two sets of issues are connected. Our path then for discovering Job to be a theologian of the cross is to explore how Job thinks about his suffering, how Job

<sup>1</sup>The “sores” (שִׁנְאִים) inflicted upon Job in 2:7 would render him unclean according to Lev 13:20.

<sup>2</sup>In the Hebrew of Job, “Satan” is always “the satan,” that is, the adversary. The book of Job depicts this “satan” as something between an independent “devil” and God’s own divine district attorney.

prays in the midst of his suffering, and how Job is related to God through his suffering.

## HOW JOB THINKS ABOUT GOD AND THE WORLD

So how does Job think? In the beginning and throughout the book until the end, Job does not think very differently from his three friends. He, like them, believes that the world operates according to the law of just retribution whereby good is rewarded and evil punished.<sup>3</sup> The irony that God, as pictured in the prologue, also appears to believe in this law ought not be lost on the reader. The difference between Job and the friends is not their common belief in this principle but rather the friends' view of Job's behavior. His friends think that because he is suffering, he is being punished. Since he is being punished, he must, in some way, be evil. Job knows he is suffering, but he also knows that he is not "evil" in a way that deserves such punishment. Therefore, because suffering is the result of punishment and the punishment should fit the crime, God is breaking the law.

Like his friends, Job thinks that the world operates (or at least should operate) in an orderly manner. This order supports the efficacy of sacrifice, including offering sacrifices for his kids just in case they might have done something wrong (1:5). Job thinks that righteousness is tied to behavior and that what constitutes righteous behavior is clear and leads to the favor of God. Moreover, in Job's final monologue (chaps. 29–31), we discover that Job believes in a certain social order that forms a counterpart to this appropriate behavior. At the head of the social order are the male elders (that is, Job and his friends) who sit at the gate and govern. Their job is to live honorably, to take care of the widow and the orphan, the needy and the stranger, and to ensure justice. They and those for whom they are responsible are also called to look down upon and keep themselves separate from the unrighteous, the rabble, the outsiders, and the outcasts (the ones Eliza Doolittle's dad in *My Fair Lady* would call the "undeserving poor"). All of this is what Job thinks prior to becoming a theologian of the cross.

## HOW JOB TALKS AND PRAYS TO GOD

But in the book, Job's thinking begins to change. We see the change in the way Job talks to God and how he prays. At the very beginning, Job talks very much like his friends:

He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing. (1:21–22)

Later, Job says to his wife, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not re-

<sup>3</sup>For these ideas, see particularly Herbert Fingarette, "The Meaning of Law in the Book of Job," *Hastings Law Journal* 29/6 (1978) 1581–1617, and Matitiahu Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James Crenshaw (New York: KTAV, 1976) 341–374.

ceive the bad?" (2:10). Ironically, this is the Job many hold up as patient and good. This is how many among us think we should pray. But Job's language quickly changes. While his friends continue defending God and haranguing Job, Job laments. He laments about his life, he laments about his friends, and he laments about his treatment at God's hand. Job yells at God and calls God names because he refuses to name his suffering as anything but onerous, oppressive, and undeserved. In short, he tells the truth, and he speaks the truth directly to God. Job's relationship to God is illumined in his speech. Even in his anger, or better, particularly in his honest and direct anger, Job never lets go of his intimate relationship to God. Thus, through Job's speech, he is on the path to becoming a theologian of the cross.

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Job's thinking changes further as God addresses him from the whirlwind (chaps. 38–41). There is much more in these speeches than can be reviewed here, but certain aspects of this divine discourse need highlighting. God shows Job that, contrary to what Job and his friends think, the world does not operate according to the law of just retribution. Law and deserving have nothing to do with the world's underlying order. The creation is better apprehended through admiration than judgment. Indeed, God—rather than serving as judge or keeper of the law—is related to the world and all that is in it as a decidedly unsentimental cosmic parent. We see this in the details of the divine speeches. God sires and gives birth. God provides sustenance and care. God restricts where necessary and grants freedom where appropriate. God disciplines and brags, admires and constrains. God is parent, both mother and father, to all of creation. The relationship with God is thus not defined by law or justice or by any system at all, but rather by a parental concern that meets each need as the occasion arises. Job is God's child not because Job is good, rewarded, deserving, or superior, but Job is God's child by virtue of his birth—which Job cannot, through curse or lament, overcome.

And there is more. God is parent not only to the ordered but most particularly to the wild (note the beasts), the chaotic (note the sea and chaos monsters), and the unclean (note almost all of the animals listed).<sup>4</sup> God teaches that his rule of the world centers on relationships and that these relationships extend to all, including the undeserving. So it is with the leprous, unclean, lamenting, and chaotic Job, who in his earlier laments aligned himself with the jackals and ostriches (30:29) as well as the sea and its monsters (7:12). As Job is instructed by this teaching, he thus discovers that he is loved and admired not because he is upright and

<sup>4</sup>For more on this, see Diane Jacobson, "God's Natural Order: Genesis or Job?" in *"And God saw that it was good": Essays on Creation and God in Honor of Terence E. Fretheim*, ed. Frederick J. Gaiser and Mark A. Throntveit, Word & World Supplement Series 5 (Saint Paul: Word & World, Luther Seminary, 2006) 49–56.

just, but because he is one with the outcast and forsaken. Job is not simply scolded; he is transformed. Mostly, though, Job is not simply grasped by insights into the relationship, but Job is grasped by the relationship itself.

### GRASPED BY GOD

Job is grasped by God. All of this is part of his becoming a theologian of the cross. These are lessons that lie beneath the surface of God's speeches. Job responds to them by changing his mind about how the world works. He does begin to think differently. In a response that is notoriously difficult to translate, Job says, "Therefore I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes" (NJPS).<sup>5</sup>

Job recognizes that he had not previously understood and that he had not always been correct in his assessment of his situation before and with God. For some interpreters, this is the beginning of Job's theological insight. But groundwork has already been laid for Job's openness to learn and his capacity to change and to respond with repentance in Job's prior capacity to lament. Job is characterized in this way in the final speech of God, the one we most often overlook. The Lord speaks thus to Eliphaz:

My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken [to] me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken [to] me what is right, as my servant Job has done. (42:7–8, emended)

Note the twice-repeated inclusion, which brings us back to questions we asked earlier: What does true prayer look like? What attitude does a truly pious person have toward God and experience? Our assumption is often that if we are truly pious, we defend God against criticism. We zip our lips and don't complain. Moreover, such piety looks down on those who do complain, assuming that complaints against God will merit divine judgment, which the pious will gladly help God dole out.

But here in God's final speech, the divine judgment is quite the opposite on two separate but related scores. First, the protective theological defenses of God spoken by the friends are declared by God to be lies, whereas Job's laments are embraced by God and declared to be true speech. Second, as Kathryn Schifferdecker rightly observes, while Job speaks directly and steadfastly (נִכְנָה) to God (the prepositional phrase אֵלַי is properly rendered "to me"), the friends speak only about God.<sup>6</sup>

This final judgment of God is where Job's prime status as a theologian of the cross comes to light. Job's lamenting is shown to exhibit the most profound sort of

<sup>5</sup>This translation is supported by Terence E. Fretheim, "God in the Book of Job," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26/2 (1999) 90–91.

<sup>6</sup>Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 35.

faith in God. Job believes so completely in the promises of God that when his experiences of suffering seem to indicate that those promises are not being fulfilled, then he, like all true lamenters, is beholden to ask questions: Why, O Lord? Until when? And God, far from merely graciously allowing such speech to Job and all who would be faithful, *insists* that we speak so, because such speech is true. Such speech names suffering for what it truly is. The theology of the cross is about telling the truth and living the truth. It is about calling things what they are. It is about finding God and God's truth hidden under their opposite. It is about alien righteousness and knowing the importance that lived experience plays in knowing. It is thus always about naming suffering, calling it what it actually is.<sup>7</sup> We get to the truth through the cross, never by going around it. There is no shortcut to God that bypasses the cross.

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So when we think of Job and his speaking what is right of the Lord, the truth is revealed in his suffering, but not as we thinkers would expect. As shown earlier, Job does not *think* more clearly than his friends, but the truth of his suffering forces him to throw himself, albeit reluctantly, on the mercy of God. And though his thinking does change as a result, one might say that Job's faith, hidden in doubt and anger, is what "saves" him. What he screams and laments for is relationship with God. He thinks perhaps that what he wants is some abstract revelation of truth and some answers as to why he is suffering. We share with Job his unquenchable desire to be given explanation and reasons for suffering. What Job gets is a relationship with God hidden within his remarkably odd encounter with God.

Job's speaking cannot be separated from Job's experience of suffering. That experience both breaks down his certainty about God and points him to a God *for* him, though how all this works remains hidden. The final logic of Job is not the logic of justice but rather the logic of relationship. Knowing God, for Job, is deeply a matter of faith through suffering within the void. Chaos is taken up into the promise of God, and the only doorway is cloaked in darkness. I wonder if we might speak of Job—indeed, of all honest lamenters—as "crushed theologians,"<sup>8</sup> those who cannot think their way to God but who are finally grasped by the cross, engrafted by the Spirit into Christ.

<sup>7</sup>"A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is": Martin Luther, Thesis 21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 53.

<sup>8</sup>This marvelous phrase comes from Fred Reisz in an unpublished presentation at a conference of teaching theologians of the ELCA.

## HOW JOB ACTS

Again, the theology of the cross is about both telling the truth and living the truth. Job's transformation and his status as a theologian of the cross do not stop with him thinking differently. He also acts differently. We see this in five different aspects of the description of Job in the final chapter of the book:

1. Job is no longer described as "upright" and "blameless" (or better translated "complete" or "perfect") as he was in the first two chapters (1:1, 8; 2:3). As Abby Pelham, then one of my students, once observed in a class, "Job has been so transformed by the tests he has undergone that even his righteousness is different."
2. Job becomes the intercessor he had once prayed for himself. He now prays for the very friends who would condemn him (42:8, 9).
3. Though Job's fortunes are restored, Job's doubled possessions do not include servants.<sup>9</sup>
4. The three daughters mentioned (then ignored) in 1:2 are now matched by three daughters named and given inheritance.<sup>10</sup>
5. Though the end of Job seems to portray a happy ending with Job surrounded by friends and family and living to a ripe old age, we are never told that Job is cured of his leprosy. He apparently remains unclean even as he lives out his days in contentment.

Suffering does not end, but as a theologian of the cross, Job and his relationship to his entire community are transformed by his encounter with God. ☩

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<sup>9</sup>Compare the list in 42:12 to 1:3.

<sup>10</sup>The importance of the daughters is noted by both Carol A. Newsom, "The Moral Sense of Nature: Ethics in the Light of God's Speech to Job," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 15/1 (1994) 27, and William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 379.