



# Dismantling Job the Supremacist<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM P. BROWN

The skin on me turns black. (Job 30:30)

**T**he older I get, the more ambivalent I feel about Job. He still has my respect for holding fast to his integrity from beginning to end, for not giving up when the odds were stacked against him. I continue to be amazed at his *chutzpah* when he boldly railed against God, even calling God to court, all the while vigorously defending himself against his “friends.” My ambivalence, rather, lies in the fact that Job is no biblical poster child for the oppressed, despite the severity of his suffering. I cannot forget Job’s point of origin in the narrative, the fact that in the beginning he was the “greatest of all the people of the east” (1:3). I cannot dismiss the fact that Job is restored to such “greatness”—even more so—in the end. For the narrator, Job’s greatness was measured by his chattel property, from “seven thousand sheep” to “very many slaves” (1:3). His wealth was so great that it “burst (*pāraṣ*) upon the land” (1:10b). This land was Job’s land. It was his plantation. I do not weep for Job.

Yes, Job was the victim of a horrific “test” executed from on high, one that he did not deserve. It was an unspeakable nightmare, particularly in view of his

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Mitzi Smith for reading through an earlier draft and providing helpful comments that have improved the essay considerably.

*What does Job learn from his experiences, and how is he different as a result of them? From a position of power, he is rendered powerless, and this is his lament. But what about at the end? Does his restoration lead him to more of an understanding of those who are powerless? Is he changed, or are his experiences something he puts behind him?*

children's deaths and his ruined health. But for all its atrocity, this "test" jolted Job out of his patriarchal slumber, particularly when YHWH finally showed up to reveal a new vision of the world but without ever explaining why Job had to suffer so. The book of Job, it turns out, is not a theodicy; it is a cosmology, one that prompts a personal transformation that is not fully completed. Call it Job's own *creatio continua*.

At the beginning of the narrative, Job is shown to be an upright and uptight patriarch in how he goes about his life, sometimes rising early in the morning to offer sacrifices on behalf of each of his children out of the nagging fear that they had sinned (1:5). While the prologue (chapters 1–2) captures only a slice of Job's (former) life, his own words offer a more unfiltered description of life in his prime, which Job describes with great nostalgic yearning.

O that I were as in the months gone by,  
as in the days when God watched over me. . . .  
when I was in my prime,  
when God's counsel was in my tent;  
when *Shaddai* was still with me,  
and my children were all around me. (29:2, 4–5)<sup>2</sup>

The poignancy is rich. Back then Job's children were alive, and everything was good. Even God. Who could ask for more? But Job goes on:

Whenever I went out to the city gate,  
and took my seat in the square,  
young men would see me and draw back,  
while old men would rise up and stand.  
Nobles would refrain from speaking,  
laying their hands on their mouths.  
Princes would hush their voices,  
their tongues stuck to their palates. (29:7–10)

They would listen to me and wait,  
keeping silent for my counsel.  
After I spoke, they would not speak again,  
my words having fallen gently upon them.  
They would wait for me as for rain,  
opening their mouths as for spring rain.  
When I smiled on them, they would not believe it;  
the light of my countenance they did not disfavor.  
I chose their way and sat as their chief,  
and I lived like a king among the troops,  
like one who comforts mourners. (29:21–25)

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own.

Then I thought to myself, "I can die in my nest,  
 multiplying my days like the phoenix,  
 my roots spreading out to the waters,  
 and the dew dwelling on my branches!  
 My glory was ever renewed with me,  
 my bow ever successful in my hand." (29:18–20)

Job recalls his glory days when he was revered by all. But the honor he enjoyed so much, in turn, silenced the voices of others. Honor for Job was a zero-sum game: he gathered it like his wealth, while others were deprived. Job's life was "perfect" in his eyes, with his amassed wealth, ordered life, large family, "many slaves," and divine favor, all perfectly aligned in his supremacy. Job saw himself as everyone's caretaker, for he felt entitled to be so, reveling in his tyranny of goodness. He prided himself for taking good care of the enslaved (see 31:13). I can easily imagine the letters MJGA emblazoned on his cap.

### JOB TURNS BLACK

But now it is all stripped from him: the wealth and the communal esteem, his pride and power. Those whom he disdained now disdain him (30:1–2). Sitting on his ash heap, Job has become an outcast among outcasts. He is now with the "senseless, disreputable brood" who have been "whipped out of the land" (30:8), whipped out, no doubt, by him. He is "mocked" and "abhorred" (30:10). No longer the object of deference, Job has become the target of scorn:

Because [God] has loosed my bowstring and afflicted me,  
 they have thrown off restraint in my presence.  
 On my right hand the mob rises up;  
 they trip up my feet and build their siege ramps against me.  
 They tear up my path and profit from my calamity;  
 no one restrains<sup>3</sup> them.  
 They come as through a wide breach;  
 amid the ruins they come rolling in.  
 Terrors converge against me;  
 my dignity is driven away like the wind;  
 my prosperity passes away like a cloud. (30:11–15)

Job bitterly complains of his "community" having turned against him. Formerly his subjects and sycophants, they now throw off all restraint in attacking him. Job's "dignity," once propped up by deferential honor, is dispelled like a puff of wind, all because Job has become *different* in their eyes. He has become the quintessential "other."

<sup>3</sup> Read 'ōṣēr for MT 'ōzēr ("no helper").

[God] has distanced my family far from me;  
 my acquaintances are wholly alienated from me.  
 My relatives are gone; my confidants have forgotten me;  
 my guests and maidservants count me as a stranger;  
 I have become an alien in their eyes.  
 I call my slave, but he does not respond;  
 I myself must beg him.  
 My breath is disgusting to my wife;  
 I am loathsome to my own family.  
 Even the young despise me;  
 when I rise, they talk against me. (19:13–18)

Job recounts how it feels to be ostracized by his own community. He is deemed an “alien” (*nokrî*) and a “stranger” (*zār*). He is “othered” by all, from his spouse and closest friends to the community at large. Such alienation consigns Job to a form of “social death,” which according to Orlando Patterson is precisely what the enslaved endured, namely the severing of all social ties, the overturning of all sense of social belonging.<sup>4</sup> By such analysis, Job has in some attenuated way tasted the bitter fruit of enslavement; he is displaced, alienated, and robbed of all sense of control. Moreover, Job’s so-called “friends” consider him something of a theological terrorist whenever he cries out for justice in his own defense (e.g., 8:2–3; 15:7, 8, 12–13).<sup>5</sup>

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Job has lost his status even in the eyes of those whom he enslaved; he is no longer deemed hierarchically “worthy” of their subservient attention. Job is now the dehumanized other. And the ultimate agent of his othering, the one who has torn him from his family and alienated him from his community, is none other than God, so Job testifies. In Job’s eyes, God has become *his* slave-master. And so, Job bitterly laments the dismantling of his supremacy. He laments his loss of power, the unraveling of his world-order, because what he has known and enjoyed for all his life—his privilege of wealth and patriarchy—God has stripped away. It was from such privilege that Job was a “father to the needy” and a “champion” of

<sup>4</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study with a New Preface* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> For a contemporary version of condemnation leveled against those who call out for justice, see Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2017), 3–8.

the “stranger” (29:16). It was from such privilege that Job could “put on righteousness” and “justice” as if it were fine clothing (29:14). Job’s words wallow in such self-privilege that you just want to grab him by the collar and say, “Job, shut up! Can you not hear what you’re saying?”

But Job keeps talking. He keeps boasting about his glory days of social supremacy and lamenting about his gory days of disinheritance. Job is now on the receiving end of his own supremacy. His hierarchy of “benevolence” has been overturned; he has become one of the disinherited. And so he reacts with rage—a patriarchal, masculinized rage—over seeing himself displaced by others who, in his estimation, deserve nothing.

Once king of the hill, Job is now lord of the ash heap. From the city gates of political influence, Job now sits in garbage surrounded by “companions” he considers subhuman.

My insides churn, never quiet;  
 days of affliction beset me.  
 I go about in sunless gloom;  
 I stand up in the assembly and cry out.  
 I am a brother of jackals,  
 and a companion of ostriches.  
 The skin on me turns black,  
 and my bones are charred with heat. (30:27–30)

Jackals and ostriches in biblical tradition were emblematic of urban destruction.<sup>6</sup> They were, according to biblical tradition, the first creatures to enter a town that had been razed to the ground. Such is Job’s way of saying that his life has been utterly ruined, destroyed like a decimated city. Such creatures are the most unwelcomed of “companions” because they signify utter ruin. But God will prove otherwise.

At the culmination of his complaint, Job laments his skin “turning black” (*šḥr*). While this is no racialized designation, the color black may hint at a class distinction that one also finds in the Song of Songs:

I am *black* and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
 like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.  
 Do not gaze at me because I am *black*,  
 for the sun has gazed on me. (Song 1:5–6a)

Here, the female protagonist, one of the two main speakers in the Song, complains to the “daughters of Jerusalem” for looking down upon her because her skin has been darkened by the sun. Her skin color reflects the menial labor of outdoor work, specifically that of tending the vineyards, toil that she detests (1:6b). Their “gaze,”

<sup>6</sup> Isa 34:13; Mic 1:8; Isa 13:22; Jer 9:11; 10:22; 49:33; 50:39.

thus, is objectifying. Nevertheless, much to the chagrin of such affluent women (cf. 3:10–11), she counts her color as beautiful, both to herself and to her lover.

Not Job. As he sits on his ash heap exposed to the sun, Job's "black" skin is sufficient cause for lament, for it signals his abject vulnerable status, as if he, once the "greatest" of men, were now a lowly laborer ever toiling under the sun, among the "scavengers" whom he continues to despise (30:2–8). Turning "black" for Job visually signals his disinherited status in the community as much as it reflects his physical dis-ease caused by his reversal of fortune. Such is the background behind Job's self-loathing (9:21; 10:1).

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With such words, Job has reached the nadir of his grievance. It still takes eight chapters before God appears, but when God does, Job's re-education begins. From his ash heap, Job encounters God in the form of a whirlwind, which conjures nothing but terror (38:1), for Job knows full well how his children died (1:19). God launches into a verbal tempest meant to instruct Job on matters of divine justice in creation and his place in it. Far from being the (slave-) master of his own universe, Job discovers how "small" he really is in the grand sweep of God's universe. But that, God tells him, is no reason to lament.

## JOB DECENTERED AND REORIENTED

Through the power of divine poetry, Job is taken on a journey from disorientation to new orientation, writ cosmic, and in the process learns something about divine "justice" (*mišpāt*; 40:8). Job must put on his seatbelt ("gird up [his] loins"), as God transports him through a poetic panorama of creation, inviting him to see the world as God sees it. The poetry revels in the language of cosmic extremes, ranging from the "recesses of the deep" (38:16) and the "gates of deep darkness" (v. 17), to the "pathway to where light dwells" (v. 19); from the "expanse of the earth" (v. 18) to the "storehouses" of snow and hail (v. 22). God also points out to Job the "waste and desolate land," remote from human contact, where channels of rain-water irrigate the desert, yielding new life (vv. 25–27). Job is both transfixed and transported. God turns Job's world not so much inside out as outside in. In God's creation, the periphery (from Job's perspective) becomes the center of Job's attention, the marginal becoming mainstream.

## ONAGERS MATTER

Creation not only extends Job's purview; it also upends it. Job suffers what could be called a "cognitive crucifixion"<sup>7</sup> marked not only by a radical *expansion* of his perspective but by a radical *shift* in his perspective. Typically ignored in sermonic reflection, the animals in God's answer to Job play a critical role in Job's paradigm shift. In addition to showing off the expanse of the cosmos, God showcases various wild creatures, near and far, wild and mythic, with swelling pride, as if they were God's only begotten children (38:39–39:30; 40:15–41:26). Each one is given its poetic due, each one endowed with freedom.

The first animal, the lion, as with nearly every creature in God's litany, is introduced with a challenge:

Can you hunt prey for the lion,  
or fill the appetite of the young lions,  
when they crouch in their dens,  
or lie in ambush in their lairs? (38:39–40)

Such a question turns Job's world on its head. Contrary to what Job expected, God does not challenge Job to "gird up" his "loins" to *kill* the lion (cf. 38:3). Rather, God challenges Job to *provide* for the lion.

Next is the mountain goat:

Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?  
Do you observe the birthing of does?  
Can you count the months that they must complete?  
Do you know the time they give birth,  
when they crouch down to give birth to their offspring,  
to deliver their young?  
Their young ones thrive and grow up in the open;  
they leave, and do not return. (39:1–4)

The poetry revels in the language of birth and growth, and to know such matters intimately, one has to be either God . . . or a goat! God's poetic description conveys a poignant admiration of the lives of these mountain mammals. God, in effect, is sharing their lives for Job to behold in awe and wonder. But for what purpose?

Enter the onager, or wild ass, a quintessentially free creature who sees things much differently than Job.

Who has set the onager free?  
Who has loosed the bonds of the wild ass,  
to whom I have given the desert for its home,

<sup>7</sup> Borrowed from Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 15.

the salt land for its dwelling place?  
 It laughs at the city's commotion;  
 it does not hear the driver's shouts.  
 It ranges the mountains as its pasture,  
 searching after all manner of greenery. (39:5–8)

The way the onager sees things reverses how Job sees things. This wild ass scorns the “commotion” of the city, filled with oppression, while flourishing in freedom in the wilderness, its home. Job, on the other hand, views the wilderness as a place of threatening chaos and his own urban context as the domain of civilized order—just the opposite of what the onager sees. But Job is invited to see the world as the onager sees it, in direct contradistinction to his own view.

The onager, moreover, proves to be a far different creature from what Job had stereotyped. For Job, the wild ass was a convenient metaphor for outcasts eking out their survival on the margins (24:4b). From Job's perspective, the figure of the onager casts the marginalized as pitiable scavengers. Harsher are Job's words later when he condemns them as a “senseless and disreputable brood” (30:8). From God's perspective, however, the onager is far from pathetic. This wild creature is quintessentially free, subject to no one. No beast of burden or lowly scavenger is the onager (cf. Num 22:22–35). Instead of farm fields and caravan trails, the wilderness is the onager's element; the salt lands are its “dwelling place” (39:6).

God goes on to describe other animals, each wild in its own way and deservedly at home in creation, from the wild ox, which refuses to serve any master, to the carefree ostrich, which laughs at the “horse and its rider” in the hunt (39:38). Like the ostrich, the warhorse “laughs at fear,” charging into battle with raging excitement and “swallowing the ground” in its path (39:24). Speaking of battle, next comes the nesting vulture (39:26–30) spying out its “prey,” namely the slain on the battlefield (v. 30). As Job was challenged to provide “prey” for the lion, he now sees the prey that is destined for the vulture, and it is human. The contrast is stark: the wild animals thrive in their respective domains while human beings slaughter each other in battle. The vultures don't mind.

God's answer concludes with two larger-than-life creatures, both equally terrifying: Behemoth and Leviathan (40:15–24; 41:1–34 [40:25–41:25]). As mythic figures of chaos, these two creatures show off their magnificence in their monstrosity. Indeed, Leviathan, the quintessential chaos monster, enjoys unrivaled royal status “over all that are proud” (41:34 [v. 26]). Take that, Job.

Altogether, from the lion to Leviathan, God's animals reveal a creation pulsing with “pizzazz” and bursting with freedom. Such a world, moreover, is graced with difference. Differences are good in God's creation, indeed *very* good (cf. Gen 1:31). Job comes to fully recognize these differences without derision or distortion. As Audre Lorde pointed out amid the mostly white women's rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, “It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions

which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.”<sup>8</sup> Job had been leading a life of fearing difference. But in God’s answer, Job comes to witness the differences among God’s creatures in all their beauty and dignity, each valued as a cherished member of God’s creation. Job comes to understand these wild creatures as subjects in their own right, not objects to be despised, or targets to be hunted, but free subjects that elicit awe and wonder.

Clearly, one lesson learned for Job is that God holds a preferential option for life flourishing in freedom, not suffering in subjugation. Or as womanist biblical scholar Mitzi Smith declares, “God’s acts of creation are life-giving; they do not decimate or enslave God’s creation.”<sup>9</sup> To the contrary: God shows Job that life flourishing in freedom and diversity is the hallmark of God’s “justice” (*mišpāt* [40:8]).<sup>10</sup> Such justice is not based on moral retribution or meritocracy. As Patricia Vesely aptly notes, whereas honor is deemed essential to Job’s well-being, it is “of little interest to the onager, the hawk, or Leviathan.”<sup>11</sup> It is based on God’s liberating love and gratuitous care. This is what divine justice looks like: all creation made in God’s image. Rejected by his friends and alienated from his community, Job complained that his only companions were jackals and ostriches. But in view of God’s dignification of the wild, Job is shown to be in *good* company after all! Ostriches and jackals, along with all the other creatures of God’s kin-dom, are nothing to complain about but all to wonder about.

And where does that leave Job? Job is restored, yes, but he is also transformed. In the epilogue, Job is restored of all his possessions, and more so. But something is askew. We find Job beginning to lead a new way of life, as indicated by one single, yet very telling, act on his part. With the same number of children as before (see 1:2), Job the patriarch commits the unprecedented act of sharing his inheritance with his three daughters, each one of whom is named (42:13–15). In biblical antiquity, the family’s wealth was typically passed on only to the sons, while the daughters had to marry outside the family as a matter of economic survival. But not in Job’s household. His daughters’ lives matter. His care for them acknowledges their dignity and worth as equal to his sons. Job, thus, upends patriarchal convention as much as God has upended Job’s view of creation. Job has translated God’s vision of creation-wide justice for the sake of his daughters’ economic well-being. He redistributes his wealth. More than acting out of compassion, Job acts out of a new sense of gender justice in a world that remains steeped in patriarchy.

But does Job have it in him to make reparations for those whom he has enslaved? Is it an oversight or is it significant that the narrator fails to mention “slaves” in Job’s restoration (42:12; cf. 1:3)? Did he free them and compensate them

<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Mitzi J. Smith, “What, Then, Is the Church?: A Womanist Biblical Scholar’s Response,” @ *This Point* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://www.ctsnet.edu/at-this-point/what-then-is-church-womanist-response/>.

<sup>10</sup> The NRSV translation is too periphrastic (“Will you even put me in the wrong?”). A better translation is “Would you question my justice?” (CEB; cf. NIV).

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Vesely, “Virtue and the ‘Good Life’ in the Book of Job,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 41, no. 1 (2019): 19.

for all their labor on his behalf? My hermeneutic of suspicion tells me that Job did not, that he remained an enslaver to the day he died. His restoration of wealth, for it to be possible, would have depended on slave labor. Although Job's eyes were opened to his daughters as much as they were opened to the creatures of the wild, they remained blind to the those whom he kept enslaved. Nevertheless, this narrative gap at least gives one pause to ponder the question and wonder how Job lived the next 140 years of his life. It took nothing short of a terrifying theophany and a panoramic tour of creation to open Job's eyes and launch him into the work of justice. But he only went so far. Reparation remains. Job had tasted the bitter fruit of "social death," but he did not follow through in the reparative work for those who endured such "death" day in and day out, as prescribed in Deuteronomy 15:12–15: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt," God reminds the Israelite slaveowner, instructing him not to send out his former slaves "empty-handed." Did Job the slaveowner not remember his own enslavement on the ash heap?

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May white folks not forget: "Remember that you were slave owners in the land of America," God is telling many of us. Remember Jim Crow. Remember the cross and the lynching tree.

I believe that the cross placed alongside the lynching tree can help us see Jesus in America in a new light, and thereby empower people who claim to follow him to take a stand against white supremacy and every kind of injustice.<sup>12</sup>

And now we have seen Jesus, the executed one, with George Floyd as he was lynched, crying out, "Everything hurts!" And so many others before and after him. Christ and all creation cry out, hurting for at least four hundred years and counting. But simply hearing that cry and remembering are not enough. Just ask Job. ☩

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<sup>12</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), xix.