SELECTED READINGS, SECOND EDITION

### THE PROBLEM OF

## EWIL

EDITED BY MICHAEL L. PETERSON

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### Job's Complaint and the Whirlwind's Answer

#### FROM THE BOOK OF JOB

An assumption underlying the Old Testament is that we live in a divinely governed, just universe. The prevailing orthodoxy was that God has structured the world so that the righteous and the wicked are rewarded or punished according to what they deserve—a simple principle of moral cause and effect. Even the book of Proverbs, despite its occasional flashes of cynicism, essentially reflects this view. The book of Job, on the other hand, is unorthodox with respect to the accepted orthodoxy, for it frankly treats the difficult fact that the justice of God is not confirmed by human experience. One's circumstances are not an accurate indicator of one's standing with God. Thus, the book calls into question the Old Testament idea of what it means to live in a divinely governed, just universe.

In a sense, the book of Job is a philosophical debate, set in the format of an old folk tale. It addresses the most perplexing of human problems:

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to extrinsic rewards. complex world that cannot be explained in simplistic categories or reduced profound psychological anguish characterizes this classic story of the Old effect principle. The exquisite intermingling of lofty theological ideas with Testament. The result is a vision of the value of a relationship with God in a own situation becomes a telling counterexample to the simple moral cause sons and the himself smitten with a terrible skin disease. So, Jobs slaughtered, and he himself smitten with a terrible skin disease. So, Jobs befell Job, usive befollowed by the befollowed by the befoll Job and usive befollowed by the befollowe ous and religious.)
befell Job, devastating his once prosperous and flourishing life. His seven why do the innecess, all sorts of evillous and religiously devout ancient patriarch. Nevertheless, all sorts of evillous and religiously devout ancient patriarch. Nevertheless, all sorts of evillous and religiously devout ancient patriarch. Nevertheless, all sorts of evillous and religiously devout ancient patriarch. Nevertheless, all sorts of evillous and religiously devout ancient patriarch. why do the innocent suffer? According to the story, Job was a morally virtue why do the innocent suffer? According to the story, Job was a morally virtue why do the innocent suffer? According to the story, Job was a morally virtue why do the innocent suffer? According to the story, Job was a morally virtue why do the innocent suffer?

The story begins with a description of Job and his relationship to God:

blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man  $w_{as}$ 

suffer in silence. Unable to restrain herself, Job's wife urges him to "curse God and die." But Job answers: with a terrible skin disease. Job's first reaction to the calamities in his life is to killed, his many flocks destroyed, his slaves slaughtered, and he himself smitten Terrible things began to happen to Job: his seven sons and three daughters are

the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at

2:10

prevent him from being silent any longer, causing bim to burst forth bitterly. breven him Gan However, Job's physical suffering and psychological confusion that he had a reward for right living and misfortune is a punishment for sin—a conviction knows that they embrace the conventional orthodoxy which holds that prosperity is thy and sit silently with him without speaking for seven days and seven nights. Joh Zophar the Naamathite (2:11)—are unable to find words to express their symposcrapes his sores. The friends—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Eventually, three of Job's friends come to comfort him as he sits in misery and

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who long for death, but it does not come, and dig for it more than Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul. Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts for me to suck? ... "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?

who rejoice exceedingly, and are glad when they find the grave?" for hidden treasures; 3:11-12, 20-22

comforter, Eliphaz, insists that God is probably disciplining Job for his own good: Job's outburst shocks the comforters, and they begin to argue with him. The first

"How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.

For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal." 5:17-18

his human comforters, he cries out directly to God: he does not need any disciplining. Beginning to despair of any resolution with After listening to many such sanctimonious pronouncements, Job answers that

"If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?" 7:20

respond if Job were innocent: Soon Bildad, the second comforter, rebukes Job, saying that God would certainly

"How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind?

if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? . . . restore to you your rightful place."

8:2-3, 6

nipotence but sharpens his questions about God's justice and goodness. Job declares: fair hearing. Furthermore, Job persists in acknowledging God's omniscience and om-It seems to Job that God is treating him as if he has sinned and will not give him a

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"Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for  $m_{\text{ercy}}$  to my accuser.

If I summoned him and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.

For he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause. He will not let me get my breath, but fills me with bitterness.

If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one! If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?

Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.

I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life.

It is all one; therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the

The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?"

9:15-24

As Job's worst fears unfold, he feels like a condemned person who can do nothing to clear himself with a judge who is like no one else:

"I become afraid of all my suffering, for I know you will not hold me innocent.

If I work proof with company then do I labor in vain?

If I wash myself with soap and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you will plunge me into filth, and my own clothes will abhor me. For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together.

There is no umpire between us, who might lay his hand on us both. If he would take his rod away from me, and not let dread of him terrify me, then I would speak without fear of him, for I know I am not what I am thought to be."

9:28-35

The suffering Job gradually realizes that he cannot persuade his comforters of his own righteousness. So he turns his attention to God and the question of why

righteous people suffer:

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"I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.

I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me.

Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the schemes of the wicked?

Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as humans see?

Are your days like the days of mortals, or your years like human years, that you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin,

although you know that I am not guilty, and there is no one to deliver out of your hand?"

=

The third comforter, Zophar, is so outraged at this utterance that he indignantly insists not only that Job is guilty but also that he must be receiving a less painful correction than he deserves:

"Should your babble put others to silence, and when you mock, shall no one shame you?

For you say, 'My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight.' But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you,

and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided.

Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves."

11:3-6

In spite of his friends' insistence that divine justice guarantees prosperity to the righteous and suffering to the wicked, Job states that it appears that God deals unfairly with human beings. Job claims that even in death—the place of Sheol—the wicked still reject God:

"When I think of it I am dismayed, and shuddering seizes my flesh.

Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?

Their children are established in their presence, and their offspring before their eyes.

Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them.

Their bull breeds without fail; their cow calves and never miscarries.

They sing to the tambourine and the lyre, and rejoice to the sound of the They send out their little ones like a flock, and their children dance around

What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit do we They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol They say to God, 'Leave us alone! We do not desire to know your ways,

get if we pray to him?"

21:6-15

So the debate continues, point and counterpoint, Job against his three friends self-justification, and the other three friends, for lacking an argument that is not enter the earlier dialogue, comes forward to try to refute both Job, for his As the discussion draws to a close, the young Elihu, a fourth comforter who did

"God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend...

The Almighty—we cannot find him; he is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness he will not violate."

37:5, 23

situation, God enters the story through a storm that has been brewing. Speaking exhausted with his own problems and with the onslaught of accusations. In this with a cascade of questions. out of a mighty whirlwind, God harshly rebukes the three comforters for their be essentially the same as that of his cohorts. Job is psychologically and physically lack of wisdom, ignores the young comforter entirely, and then confronts Job For all its pretense of knowing God's ways, however, Elihu's message turns out to

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?

> when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone

and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?-

and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?

Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place,

so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?

It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment.

Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken.

Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of

Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?

Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know

Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness,

that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home?"

38:2-20

and measurable justice in the world gives way to his emerging perception of God Job is overwhelmed by his encounter with God. His earlier insistence on a strict mulaic description. So, Job answers: as still in sovereign control but governing the world by a wisdom that resists for

"See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.

I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no fur-

40:4-5

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### Then God begins another barrage of questions:

"Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me.

Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?

Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?

Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor.

Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on all who are proud, and abase them.

Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand.

Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below.

Then I will also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory."

40:7-14

Job is further humbled by God's second speech and, in response, utters these words:

"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . .

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

42:2-3, 5-6

Many scholars as well as general readers often interpret the end of the story as depicting a puny human finally succumbing to divine power or a rebellious sinner admitting wrongdoing. However, the word "repent" in the context of this Hebrew text clearly means to change one's mind, perhaps with some regret for having held an incorrect opinion in the first place, but it does not mean to admit moral wrongdoing or spiritual rebellion. Seen in this light, Job is a faithful believer, an honest questioner, a righteous sufferer, and a religious pioneer.