

Responses to Suffering and Evil: Lamentations and Wisdom Literature

Lecture 20 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-20>

Overview

This lecture begins with the Book of Lamentations, a short book of dirges that laments the destruction of Jerusalem and moves on to introduce the third and final section of the Hebrew Bible - the Ketuvim, or “Writings.” This section of the Bible contains three books that exemplify the ancient Near Eastern literary genre of “Wisdom” – Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs reinforces the Deuteronomistic idea of divine retributive justice according to which the good prosper and the evil are punished. The conventional assumption of a moral world order is attacked in the Book of Job. The book explores whether people will sustain virtue when suffering and afflicted, and brings charges of negligence and mismanagement against God for failing to punish the wicked and allowing the righteous to suffer.

1. The Book of Lamentations

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* When Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon burned the temple and destroyed Jerusalem, the initial reaction was one of overwhelming grief and sadness, and that’s represented primarily in the Book of Lamentations. It’s a very short book of dirges that laments the loss of Jerusalem as the death of a beloved person. And it’s traditionally attributed to Jeremiah. The Bible itself doesn’t make this claim; it’s an old tradition.

[2] It may have arisen, however, because of all of the prophets, Jeremiah is the one who reveals the most to us about his personal suffering and grief, and because he was present as an eyewitness at the destruction. There’s no real logical development of ideas in Lamentations primarily because it’s structured by an artificial device. There are five chapters and four of the chapters are acrostic poems. This means that each verse, or sometimes a series of verses, begins with a letter of the alphabet in sequence. So in chapter 3 you have three verses per letter of the alphabet. But this kind of acrostic poetic formation gives the poem a kind of formal unity, at the same time that it has no logical unity or logical flow. And it’s been pointed out that that form is particularly appropriate for an expression of grief that is too profound or too all encompassing to be logical.

[3] The Lamentations over Jerusalem resemble very much David’s lamentations over Saul. The mourner spends time contrasting the former splendor of the beloved to his or her present state. And we have lots of Ancient Near Eastern prototypes for this kind of lamentation — lamentations over destroyed cities which are understood as the result of the deity’s decision to abandon the city.

[4] In Lamentations we’re given a very detailed picture of the great suffering that accompanied the final collapse. Lamentations 1:1:

“Alas!
Lonely sits the city
Once great with people!
She that was great among nations
Is become like a widow;
The princess among states
Is become a thrall.”

[5] Chapter 4:

Alas!
The gold is dulled,
Debased the finest gold,
The sacred gems are spilled a

At every street corner.
 The precious children of Zion;
 Once valued as gold —
 Alas, they are accounted as earthen pots,
 Work of a potter's hands!
 Even jackals offer the breast
 And suckle their young;
 But my poor people has turned cruel,
 Like ostriches of the desert.
 The tongue of the suckling cleaves
 To its palate for thirst.
 Little children beg for bread;
 None give them a morsel.
 Those who feasted on dainties
 Lie famished in the streets;
 Those who were reared in purple
 Have embraced refuse heaps.
 The guilt of my poor people
 Exceeded the iniquity of Sodom,
 Which was overthrown in a moment,
 Without a hand striking it.
 Her elect were purer than snow,
 Whiter than milk;
 Their limbs were ruddier than coral,
 Their bodies were like sapphire.
 Again, the description of the physical beauty
 of the beloved,
 Now their faces are blacker than soot,
 They are not recognized in the streets;
 Their skin has shriveled on their bones,
 It has become dry as wood.
 Better off were the slain of the sword
 Than those slain by famine,
 Who pined away, [as though] wounded,
 For lack of the fruits of the field.
 With their own hands, tenderhearted women
 Have cooked their children;
 Such became their fare,
 In the disaster of my poor people.

[6] The poet here, though, does adopt the standard Deuteronomistic interpretation of events which infers sin from suffering, and therefore, harps on the sin and the uncleanness of Jerusalem that brought on this calamity. Their guilt exceeded the iniquity of Sodom in the passage we just read, and this is a strategy that of course justifies God. The poet singles out the corrupt priests, the corrupt prophets for blame. He attacks the popular ideology of the inviolability of Zion. Israel's many sins are what caused Yahweh to pour out his wrath and destroy Jerusalem utterly.

[7] The descriptions of Yahweh's wrath, anger, his consuming rage, these are some of the most powerful and most violent poetry in the Hebrew Bible. They tend to divert attention, in fact, from the people's guilt and focus attention on their suffering. Children crying for bread, children starving to death, women raped, men abused. In chapter 3, the poet switches into the first person so Jerusalem is speaking like one who is pursued and abused, beaten by an angry and violent master.

[8] Chapter 3 [vv 1-11]:

I am the man who has known affliction
 Under the rod of His wrath;
 Me he drove on and on
 In unrelieved darkness;
 On none but me He brings down His hand
 Again and again, without cease.
 He has worn away my flesh and skin;
 He has shattered my bones.
 All around me He has built
 Misery and hardship;
 He has made me dwell in darkness,
 Like those long dead.
 He has walled me in and I cannot break
 out;
 He has weighed me down with chains.
 And when I cry and plead,
 He shuts out my prayer;
 He has walled in my ways with hewn
 blocks,
 He has made my paths a maze.

He is a lurking bear to me,
A lion in hiding;
He has forced me off my way and mangled
me,
He has left me numb.

- [9] A remarkably violent passage. And in another remarkable passage, the poet describes God as refusing to hear the prayers of Israel. He no longer can forgive. He simply has to punish. This is in chapter 3 as well, verses 42 to 45.

We have transgressed and rebelled,
And You have not forgiven.
You have clothed Yourself in anger and
pursued us,
You have slain without pity.
You have screened Yourself off with a
cloud
That no prayer may pass through.
You have made us filth and refuse
In the midst of the peoples.

- [10] So God is simply refusing to even hear Israel's prayer. This is an emphasis not so much on Israel's guilt, but on Israel's tremendous suffering, God's hardheartedness.

- [11] The poem ends with a plea of reconciliation in 5:19-22.

But You, O Lord, are enthroned forever,
Your throne endures through the ages.
Why have you forgotten us utterly,
Forsaken us for all time?
Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself,
And let us come back;
Renew our days as of old!
For truly, You have rejected us,
Bitterly raged against us.
Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself,
And let us come back;
Renew our days as of old!

- [12] Lamentations represents one response to the fall of Jerusalem. It's an overwhelming sense of loss, grief, misery, a sense of shock too at

God's treatment. And also a longing to return, a longing for renewal and reconciliation. The 200 years following the destruction would prove to be a time, a very critical time, of transition. And Israelite literature in this period reflects the Israelites' struggle with the philosophical and religious challenge of the destruction.

- [13] How could the disastrous events be explained? We've already seen the response of the Deuteronomistic School. Israel was collectively punished for idolatry. We've seen that history simply reflects justice on a national and international level in this view. We've also seen the response of Ezekiel. He promoted the idea of a continued relationship with God in exile and was awaiting a fantastic restoration, a redesign of human nature. We've seen the response of Second Isaiah which emphasizes the universal significance of Israel's suffering, a universal mission for Israel. For both Ezekiel and the author of Second Isaiah, Israel's suffering is serving a purpose in the divine plan. It's necessary. Israel needs purification and redemption and that will prepare her for a new role in world history.

- [14] But there are other responses as well and they're found in the material that's collected in the third section of the Hebrew Bible. That's the section referred to really as Ketuvim, which in Hebrew simply means writings, written things. It's sort of a miscellany, a catch-all phrase. And the final portion of the course is going to be devoted now to that third section. So Torah, Neviim or prophets, and Ketuvim, or writings.

- [15] Next time I'm going to discuss the problem of dating many of the works that are in this third section, the Writings. For now it'll suffice to say that while some of the books in this third section of the Bible may have pre-dated the exile, they became canonical, they became authoritative for the community in the post-exilic period and therefore served as a prism through which to view and come to grips with Israel's history.

2. *An Introduction to Wisdom Books in the Ketuvim*

- [16] So we're going to turn today, first of all, to an examination of the three books that represent the Wisdom tradition, what's referred to as the Wisdom literature, or Wisdom tradition in

ancient Israel. The Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

- [17] Israelite Wisdom literature belongs to a much wider and broad Wisdom legacy or tradition in the Ancient Near East. There's very little in biblical Wisdom literature apart from its monotheism that lacks a parallel in the Wisdom literature of Egypt or Mesopotamia. So Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature is literature that's characterized by a praise of human intelligence, applied to understanding the ways of the world, the ways of society. It tends to contain traditional advice — advice that's been found to be tried and true. It tends to be very individually oriented, but at the same time, quite universal and humanistic in its orientation as well. In keeping with this style, Israelite Wisdom literature doesn't really speak to the particular historical condition of Israel. It speaks to the general human condition. It makes no claim to having been divinely revealed — no special claim to having been conveyed by a prophet or by Moses. It's simply observational wisdom; advice and counsel that can be weighed or confirmed or disputed by experience.
- [18] Again, if you were simply to open up the Book of Proverbs and read something in there, unless it had the word Yahweh, you wouldn't know that it didn't come from some Egyptian Wisdom literature, or Mesopotamian Wisdom literature. There are various types of Wisdom material. Scholars have classified the Wisdom material into three main categories.
- [19] The Hebrew word for wisdom — which is the word *hokhmah* — literally means skill and probably refers to the skill of living well or living properly. The three types of Wisdom literature that we find are what we could call (1) clan or family wisdom. These materials tend to be common sense aphorisms and observations, the kinds of things that are common to all cultures. They're scattered around the Hebrew Bible, but most of them are contained in the Book of Proverbs.
- [20] So, for example, Proverbs 15:17, "Better a meal of vegetables where there is love / Then a fattened ox where there is hate." It's the kind of thing you can imagine your grandmother saying. Chapter 20:14: "'Bad, bad,' says the buyer, / But having moved off, he congratulates

himself." Or 26:14: "The door turns on its hinge, / And the lazy man on his bed," and neither of them really gets anywhere. 25:25: "Like cold water to a parched throat / Is good news from a distant land." Many of the Proverbs we classify as clan or family wisdom are parental. They tend to sound as if they're being said to a son, not so much a daughter, but to a son.

- [21] The second category of Wisdom literature is what we call court wisdom, and we have a lot of this from Egypt. A great deal of court wisdom came from Egypt to serve the needs of the court. It tends to be bureaucratic advice, administrative advice, career advice, instruction on manners or tact, how to be diplomatic, how to live well and prosper — practical wisdom.
- [22] So, for example, Proverbs 24:27, "Put your external affairs in order, / Get ready what you have in the field, / Then build yourself a home." Or 21:23: "He who guards his mouth and tongue / Guards himself from trouble," [on] tact; 11:14, "For want of strategy an army falls, / But victory comes with much planning," or 12:1, "He who loves discipline loves knowledge; / He who spurns reproof is a brutish man."
- [23] Then the third category of Wisdom literature is what we might call more free-wheeling existential reflection or probing — a reflective probing into the critical problems of human existence, and I'm going to talk about that in much more detail as we get to the Book of Job.
- [24] Now as I mentioned before, all of these types of Wisdom literature tend to be very universalistic, humanistic, ahistorical. There's nothing particularly Israelite about them. There's no mention of the exodus, there's no mention of Sinai or Moses or covenant or any of the early narratives of the nation. And they [the Wisdom texts] are paralleled in great abundance in the writings of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures.
- [25] Sometimes there's an attempt to connect wisdom specifically with belief in Yahweh. But biblical Wisdom like Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom generally grounds morality on non-specific notions of prudence and God-fearing in a sort of non-specific way, rather than on the historical covenant with Yahweh.

3. *The Book of Proverbs*

- [26] So let's look at the Book of Proverbs in a little more detail. Proverbs is the classic book of Wisdom. It contains some material of great antiquity. Even though the book probably reached its final form only in post-exilic times, surely a great deal of it is much older. There are many affinities between Proverbs and Egyptian and Canaanite Wisdom literature, so that suggests that Israel assimilated Wisdom material from the wider environment.
- [27] The chief aim of Proverbs seems to be the inculcation of wisdom as the means to social tranquility and a happy life. Young people should learn to master their impulses. They should lead productive and sensible lives. Many of the maxims are intended to educate sons, there's no mention of daughters here, and a good deal of the first nine chapters is formally pedagogical, clearly pedagogical, and can be compared quite productively with some Egyptian writings that we have from the third millennium — the Egyptian teaching of Amenemopet, or the Babylonian Counsels of Wisdom; tremendous parallels among these works. But these first nine chapters warn against the seductions of foreign women and they urge young men to pursue wisdom. And wisdom here is figured — almost hypostasized, an attribute or a characteristic that's almost put into a concrete human form, wisdom is figured as a virtuous woman who promises insight and counsel. This woman was created before all other created things. And wisdom again, figured as a woman, assisted Yahweh in the creation — in the ordering, I should say, the ordering of the universe. Wisdom was with God at that time.
- [28] Proverbs values hard work and diligence, and warns against excessive sleep and sex, and wine. Proverbs recommends honesty in your business affairs and kindness, and loyalty, impartiality, sobriety, and humility, restraint, and sincerity. Wealth is very nice, but it's not to be desired at the cost of calmness and peace.
- [29] The Wisdom sayings that appear in Proverbs are usually these short two-line sentences in which the second line runs parallel in some way to the first. Some scholars have classified the different kinds of parallelism you find in the book of Proverbs and I've written the three main forms up here.
- [30] An example of synonymous parallelism, where the second line is essentially synonymous with the first — that's found in Proverbs 22:1. It's a classic feature of biblical poetry in general. We'll see it in the Psalms. For an example, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches / And favor," parallel to a good name, "is better than silver and gold," parallel to great riches [RSV translation; see note 1]. So the two lines are somewhat synonymous.
- [31] In antithetic parallelism the two lines form a balanced pair of opposites, so in Proverbs 10:1, "A wise son makes a glad father / But a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother" [RSV translation].
- [32] When the second line seems to complete the thought of the first, it's called ascending parallelism. We find that in Proverbs 11:22, "Like a gold ring in the snout of a pig / Is a beautiful woman bereft of sense." Another feature of Proverbs is that wisdom itself is established as a religious concept. It seems to have some religious value. Proverbs tries to link wisdom with reverence for God and obedience to God.
- [33] In Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord" or reverence, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [knowledge]. Fools despise wisdom and discipline," or chapter 3:5-8, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, / And do not rely on your own understanding." Wisdom guards one from evil, the wise person accepts the sufferings with which God is disciplining him. So in Proverbs 3:12, "For Yahweh reproves," or disciplines, "him whom he loves / As a father, the son in whom he delights" [based on RSV translation].
- [34] Keep that in mind as we turn to Job, because I think the most important thing about the Book of Proverbs is its almost smug certainty that the righteous and the wicked of the world receive what they deserve in this life. There's a complacency here, an optimism. God's just providence and a moral world order, are presuppositions that it just doesn't seem to question. The wise person's deeds are good and will bring him happiness and success. The foolish person's deeds are evil and they are going to lead to failure and ruin. The key idea is that a truly wise person knows that the world is essentially coherent. It's ethically ordered.

There are clear laws of reward and punishment that exist in the world.

[35] Proverbs 26:27; “He who digs a pit will fall into it / and a stone will come back upon him who starts it rolling” [RSV translation]. Or 13:6: “Righteousness protects him whose way is blameless; Wickedness subverts the sinner.” If the righteous suffer then they are being chastised or chastened by God just as a son is disciplined by his father. He shouldn’t reject this reproof, he should welcome it.

[36] This insistence, on the basic justice of the world, and the power of wisdom or fear of the Lord to guarantee success and security was one strand of ancient Israelite thought. It reaches crystallization in the Book of Proverbs. It was available as a response to or an explanation of the catastrophes that had befallen the nation. We’ve seen it at work in the Deuteronomistic school, unwilling to relinquish the idea of a moral God in control of history and preferring to infer the nation’s sinfulness from its suffering and calamity. Better to blame the sufferer Israel and so keep God and the system of divine retributive justice intact.

[37] But it’s precisely this formulaic and conventional piety that is challenged by two other remarkable Wisdom books in the Bible: the Book of Job and the Book of Ecclesiastes. In Job we find the idea that suffering is not always punitive. It is not always a sign of wickedness. It’s not always explicable. And this is the first of several subversions of fundamental biblical principles that we encounter in the Book of Job.

4. Structure of and Literary Components in The Book of Job

[38] The Book of Job — we really don’t know its date. It’s probably no earlier than the sixth century BCE, but scholars disagree and there are portions of it that seem to reflect a very old and very ancient tradition. It’s one of the hardest books of the Bible for moderns to read, and I think that’s because its conclusions — to the degree that we can agree on what the conclusions might be — its conclusions seem to fly in the face of some basic religious convictions.

[39] You have to allow yourself, I think, to be surprised, to open your mind, to allow yourself

to take Job’s charges against God seriously. After all, the narrator makes it clear that God does take them seriously. God nowhere denies Job’s charges and, in fact, at one point the narrator has God say that Job has spoken truly. So no matter how uncomfortable Job may make you feel, you need to understand his claims and not condemn him.

[40] Job is going to attack the optimistic conventional piety that is typified in the Book of Proverbs. He’s going to challenge the assumption that there is a moral world order. The issues that are raised in this book are twofold: first, why God permits blatant injustice and undeserved suffering and evil to exist in the world, and second of all, whether people will be virtuous when they are afflicted and suffering. In other words, are people righteous only because God will reward them for it, or are they righteous because of the intrinsic and inherent value of righteousness? Those are the two issues.

[41] Now literarily, the book contains two primary elements. First, we have a prose story and that provides a framework for the book, that’s chapters 1 and 2 and then it returns in chapter 42 at the end of the book. Into this prose framework a large poetic section of dialogue and speeches has been inserted.

[42] So there are two main literary components. Now the prose framework concerning a scrupulously righteous man named Job, afflicted by horrendous calamity, was probably a standard Ancient Near Eastern folktale of great antiquity. The story isn’t set in Israel; it’s not about an Israelite. It’s set in Edom. Job is an eastern magnate who dwells in the country of Uz, not an Israelite. But the Israelite author has used this older Ancient Near Eastern legend about a man named Job for his own purposes.

[43] The name Job, which in Hebrew is pronounced, *iyyon*, is bivalent in meaning. It can mean “enemy” in Hebrew, by changing vowels around; but it’s the root for enemy, *oyev*, or, if we take it in Aramaic, it can mean “one who repents,” “a repentant one.” And as we’re going to see, the name will be appropriate in both senses as the story progresses.

[44] There’s a handout on the side of the room [*appended to the present transcript*]. I’m not

sure everyone took one when they came in. I'm wondering if it could be distributed please. I'm sorry. It's going to help you chart what goes on in Job. But this handout contains an outline of the book's structure on one side — so it's mapped out on one side. On the other side, it has some important verses and terms.

[45] But we'll see from the outline of the structure, chapters 1 and 2 have this prose prologue about the pious and prosperous Job and his devastation, which is the result of a challenge which is put to God. At the end of that prologue, at the end of chapter 2, he has three friends who come to sit with him in silence for seven days. The silence doesn't last very long because we move then into the large poetic section and that extends from chapter 3 all the way to chapter 42, verse 7. So you'll see that structure on the handout. There are many ways to map the structure of the Book of Job. Your handout charts, I think, one of the more common and clearer representations.

[46] Looking now specifically at the poetic section: First, you have a dialogue between Job and his three friends that goes from chapter 3 to chapter 31, verse 40. And it can be divided into three cycles of speeches. Job opens each cycle — so the first speech in each cycle is by Job — and then his friends speak in a regular pattern. First, Eliphaz with Job responding and then Bildad with Job responding and then Zophar; and you have this pattern of six speeches. It occurs three times but in fact the third time the reply by Zophar is omitted and that deviation ensures that Job has the first and the last word. He has a summation speech in chapters 29 to 31.

[47] At first, the friends seek to comfort Job and to explain his suffering but they become increasingly harsh, ultimately bearing a callous contempt for Job's condition. Now this section closes with the long speech by Job, as I said: 29 to 31. He's lamenting the loss of his past, pleasant life. He protests his innocence, he calls on God to answer.

[48] But then Elihu, this previously unannounced fourth friend appears. He gives four speeches from chapters 32 to 37. He admonishes Job; he defends God's justice, and then this is followed by a poetic discourse between God who poses a series of rhetorical questions and Job who appears contrite. And that section also falls into four parts rather like Elihu's speech. You have

two long speeches by Yahweh, two short ones by Job.

[49] Finally, there's a concluding prose epilogue that vindicates Job. God criticizes Job's friends, and then in a rather unexpected happy ending, we have Job restored to his fortunes and finally experiencing a peaceful death.

5. *Prose Prologue in the Book of Job*

[50] So let's look at the contents in greater detail now that we've reviewed the structure. The story opens by introducing us to Job. He's said to be a blameless and upright man. He fears God and he shuns evil, that is chapter 1, verse 1. So the moral virtue and innocence of Job is established in the opening line as a narrative fact, a non-negotiable narrative fact. And yet this Job is to become the victim of a challenge issued by "the satan" in the heavenly counsel. I say "the satan" deliberately. The satan. The satan is certainly not the devil. There's no such notion in the Hebrew Bible. The phrase, "the satan," occurs four times in the Hebrew Bible, here and in Numbers 22 and in Zechariah 3.

[51] "The satan" is simply a member of the divine counsel — one of God's minions whose function it is to investigate affairs on earth and to act as a kind of prosecuting attorney. He has to bring evildoers to justice. And it's only in later Jewish, and especially Christian thought, that the term loses the definite article — from "the satan" which means "the prosecutor" essentially, the prosecuting attorney — and becomes a proper name, Satan, for an enemy or opponent of God.

[52] This later concept of Satan develops as a means of explaining evil without attributing it to God, but that isn't the function of the satan here. He works for God and when Yahweh boasts of his pious servant Job, the prosecuting angel wonders, as his portfolio requires him to do, whether Job's piety is sincere. Perhaps he's motivated by self-interest. Since he's been blessed with such good fortune and prosperity he's naturally enough pious and righteous, but would his piety survive affliction and suffering? Deprived of his wealth wouldn't he curse God to his face? You have to notice as you're reading the euphemistic use of "bless God" instead of "curse God." The ancient writers did not want to write down "curse God" so they wrote "bless God," but we need to

understand that's a euphemistic way of avoiding writing "curse God."

[53] So wouldn't he curse God to his face? God is quite confident that Job's piety is not superficial, it's not driven by the desire for reward, and so he permits the satan to put Job to the test. Job's children are killed, his cattle are destroyed, his property is destroyed, but Job's response in chapter 1:21 is, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return; God gives and God takes away, may the name of the Lord be blessed [see note 2]."

[54] The narrator then adds in verse 22, "In all this —," and if you flip over I've got some of these key verses on the back of your handout to help you keep track, "In all this Job did not sin or impute anything unsavory to God." And God again praises Job to the satan, saying, "And still he holds on to his integrity, so you incited me to destroy him for nothing." That's chapter 2:3. So the satan proposes increasing the suffering, and God agrees on the condition that Job's life be preserved.

[55] So the satan strikes Job's body with these terrible painful sores, trying to crush his spirit and Job's wife rages, "Do you still hold on to your integrity? Bless God," curse God "and die," chapter 2:9. But still Job will not sin, he will not curse God, he insists on remaining virtuous and he responds, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?" [RSV translation]

[56] So at first glance it would appear that Job accepts his bitter fate. But note: after the first round of suffering, the narrator observed that "in all this Job did not sin with his lips or impute anything unsavory to God," but now he merely observes, "in all this Job did not sin with his lips." Not with his lips perhaps, but in his heart did he impute unsavory things to God?

[57] If we were to move directly to the conclusion of the folktale in chapter 42, if we jump from this point just to the conclusion, in 42:7 is where the conclusion begins, we would find that Job is rewarded fully for his patience and steadfast loyalty and his household and his belongings are restored to him twice over. The folktale standing alone could be read as the story of an innocent man tested, who accepts his fate. He retains his faith, and he's rewarded.

[58] Standing alone, the tale appears to reflect the values and the conventional piety of the Wisdom literature and of the Deuteronomistic school. But the folktale doesn't stand alone. The anonymous author of Job uses this earlier legend concerning the righteous man Job as a frame for his own purposes, and the hint at the end of the prologue that Job perhaps is beginning to impute unsavory things to God points forward to this extensive poetic dialogue that's following.

6. *Poetic Speech Cycles in the Book of Job*

[59] Here are Job's unsavory accusations against God. Here we have a most impatient and furious Job who will charge God with gross mismanagement of the world and eventually deny the existence of a moral order altogether. So reading the Book of Job is a fascinating exercise because the two types of material in the book, the prose frame and the poetic dialogue in the middle, they appear to be in tension. And yet interwoven, as they are now, they work together and the one shapes our reading of the other.

[60] Our reception of the accusations of Job's friends in the poetic dialogue — our reception of those words is determined by the prose framework's assertion that Job is innocent. That's a non-negotiable narrative fact and because of the fact of Job's righteousness, we know Job's friends are lying when they say Job must be suffering for some hidden sin. And we know that Job's self-defense, that he hasn't deserved the suffering is correct.

[61] We're going to rehearse some of the arguments that are advanced in the central core, the poetic core of the book, and here I think a helpful guide through the arguments — there are lots of commentaries on the Book of Job, but one commentary that I think is helpful in just sort of working through some of the arguments of the interlocutors is the analysis of Edwin Good [see note 3].

[62] Although Job doesn't exactly curse God in his first speech, he does curse the day of his birth. And in a passage that alludes repeatedly to creation, Job essentially curses all that God has accomplished as creator of the cosmos. He wishes he were dead, and at this point he doesn't even ask why this has happened to him,

he only asks why he should be alive when he prefers death.

nothing,” and we suspect by this verbal coincidence that Job is right.

[63] Eliphaz’s reply is long and elaborate. He seems to offer comfort. He seems to offer comfort, until he injects a new element in the discussion and that’s the element of justice. Job hasn’t mentioned the issue of justice up to this point, but Eliphaz says, “Think now, what innocent man ever perished? / Where have the upright been destroyed? / As I have seen, those who plow evil / And sow mischief reap them,” chapter 4:7-8.

[68] Legal terms dominate, as Job calls for the charges against him to be published, and then he hurls countercharges in a suit against God. Charges of unworthy conduct, of spurning his creatures while smiling on the wicked, on scrutinizing Job even though he knows Job to be innocent, and this too is a subversion of a common prophetic literary genre that we’ve seen: the riv or the covenant lawsuit in which God through his prophets charges Israel with flagrant violation of the terms of the covenant and warns of inevitable punishment.

[64] So Eliphaz is handing Job the standard line of biblical Wisdom literature as exemplified by something like the book of Proverbs, belief in a system of divine retributive justice — that retribution is just. By definition there can be no undeserved suffering. The implication is that Job has deserved this suffering — a thought that apparently hadn’t occurred to Job — and the question of undeserved suffering is now going to dominate the rest of the discussion.

[69] Here, in Job, it’s a man who arraigns God and yet, Job asserts, since God is God and not a human adversary, there’s really no fair way for the lawsuit between them to be tried or arbitrated. “Man cannot win a suit against God,” chapter 9:2. Job is powerless in the face of this injustice.

[65] Job’s second speech is very disorderly. It’s full of wildly contradictory images that may reflect the shock and the pain and the rage that now overwhelm him. He seems to be haunted by Eliphaz’s connection of his suffering with some sin and so he turns to address God directly. He admits he’s not perfect but surely, he objects, he doesn’t deserve such affliction.

[70] These ideas all find expression in Job 10:1-7 [JPS translation]:

I am disgusted with life;

I will give rein to my complaint,

Speak in the bitterness of my soul.

I say to God, “Do not condemn men;

Let me know what You charge me with.

Does it benefit You to defraud,

To despise the toil of Your hands,

While smiling on the counsel of the wicked?

Do You have the eyes of flesh?

Is Your vision that of mere men?

Are Your days the days of a mortal?

Are Your years the years of a man,

That You seek my iniquity

And search out my sin?

You know that I am not guilty,

And that there is none to deliver from Your hand...

[66] In chapter 8 we have Bildad’s speech and it’s tactless and unkind. He says, “Will God pervert the right? / Will the Almighty pervert justice? / If your sons sinned against Him, / He dispatched them for their transgressions,” 8:3-4 [JPS translation]. In other words, God is perfectly just and ultimately all get what they deserve. Indeed, your children, Job, must have died because they sinned, so just search for God and ask for mercy.

[67] The friends’ speeches lead Job to the conclusion that God must be indifferent to moral status. God doesn’t follow the rules that he demands of human beings. This is chapter 9:22, “He finishes off both perfect and wicked.” When Job complains, “He wounds me much for nothing,” chapter 9:17, he’s echoing God’s own words to the satan in the prologue. Remember when God says to the satan you have “incited me to destroy him for

[71] Job repeats his wish to die, this time less because of his suffering and more because his worldview has collapsed. He sees that divine power is utterly divorced from justice and

that's a second fundamental biblical assumption subverted.

[72] But Job's words only seem to egg his interlocutors on. Eliphaz had implied that Job was a sinner. Bildad had baldly asserted that his sons had died for their sins and now Zophar's going to claim that actually Job is suffering less than he deserves. And Job isn't persuaded. He isn't persuaded that he has sinned or more precisely, that he has sinned in proportion to the punishment he is now suffering. God is simply unjust. The Job of this poetic dialogue portion of the book is hardly patient or pious. He is angry, he is violent, he argues, he complains and vehemently insists upon his innocence.

[73] In the fourth speech by Job — now this is the speech that opens the second cycle of speeches — Job appeals to creation. God's controlling power is arbitrary and unprincipled. He interferes with the natural order, he interferes with the human order, and this is itself a subversion of the Genesis portrait of creation as a process whose goal and crown is humankind. Again, Job demands a trial. He demands a trial in the widely quoted and mistranslated verse — this is Job 13:15: "He may well slay me. I may have no hope — but I must argue my case before Him." In other words, Job knows that he can't win but he still wants his day in court. He wants to make his accusation of God's mismanagement. He wants to voice his protest even though he knows it will gain him nothing.

[74] In a pun on his name, *Iyyov*, Job asks God, "Why do You hide Your face, / And treat me like an enemy?", treat me like *anoyev*, 13:28 [correction: chapter 13:24; JPS translation]. In his second speech Job fully expects to be murdered, not executed, but murdered by God and hopes only that the evidence of his murder will not be concealed he says in 16:18, "Earth, do not cover my blood" [JPS translation].

[75] Job's third speech reiterates this desire, the desire that the wrong against him not be forgotten. "Would that my words were written, would that they were engraved in an inscription, with an iron stylus and lead, forever in rock they were incised," 19:23-24.

[76] Job's three speeches in the second cycle become increasingly emotional and for their

part the speeches of his friends in this cycle become increasingly cruel. Their insistence that suffering is always a sure sign of sin seems to justify hostility towards and contempt for Job. He's now depicted as universally mocked and humiliated and despised and abused. One cannot help but see in this characterization of Job's so-called friends, an incisive commentary on the callous human propensity to blame the victim, and to do so lest our tidy and comfortable picture of a moral universe in which the righteous do not suffer, should come apart at the seams as Job's has.

[77] Job opens the third cycle of speeches urging his friends to look, to really see his situation, because if they did they would be appalled. Job's situation looked at honestly requires the admission that God has done this for no reason and that the friends' understanding of the world is a lie. Job asserts baldly: there is no distributive justice, there's no coherent or orderly system of morality in this life or any other. There is no principle of afterlife, after all, in the Hebrew Bible.

[78] Chapter 21:7-26 [JPS translation]:

Why do the wicked live on,
Prosper and grow wealthy?
Their children are with them always,
And they see their children's children.
Their homes are secure, without fear;
They do not feel the rod of God.
...their children skip about.
They sing to the music of timbrel and lute,
And revel to the tune of the pipe;
They spend their days in happiness,
And go down to Sheol in peace.
...How seldom does the lamp of the
wicked fail,
Does the calamity they deserve befall
them?
...[You say,] "God is reserving his
punishment for his sons";
Let it be paid back to Him that He may feel
it,
...One man dies in robust health,
All tranquil and untroubled;

His pails are full of milk;
The marrow of his bones is juicy.
Another dies embittered,
Never having tasted happiness.
They both lie in the dust
And are covered with worms.

[79] But the friends can't look honestly at Job; they can't allow that, indeed, a righteous man suffers horribly.

[80] By the end of the third cycle Job is ready and eager for his trial, but he can't find God. Job's final speech in the third cycle focuses on this theme of divine absence. God is irresponsibly absent from the world and the result is human wickedness. So from the idea that God is morally neutral or indifferent, Job has moved to the implicit charge that God is responsible for wickedness. He rewards wickedness; he causes wickedness by his absence, his failure to govern properly. He is both corrupt and a corrupter of others. "If it is not so, he says, who will prove me a liar and bring my words to nought."

[81] Yet, even in the depths of his anguish, and even though he is now convinced that God does not enforce a moral law in the universe, Job clings to one value: righteousness is a virtue in and of itself, and even if it brings no reward Job will not give up his righteousness. Face to face with the shocking insight that good and evil are met with indifference by God, that righteousness brings no reward and wickedness no punishment, Job although bitter, refuses to succumb to a moral nihilism. Chapter 27:2-6:

By God who has deprived me of justice!
By Shaddai who has embittered my life!
As long as there is life in me,
And God's breath is in my nostrils,
My lips will speak no wrong,
Nor my tongue utter deceit.
Far be it for me to say that you are right;
Until I die I will maintain my integrity.
I persist in my righteousness and will not yield;
I shall be free of reproach as long as I live.

[82] These last lines recall the words of God and the satan in the prelude. The satan had said that a man will not hold on to virtue or to righteousness in the face of suffering. He'll give everything away for his life. So this narrative set-up guides or influences our interpretation of Job's statement here. Although he is losing his life, Job says he will not give anything away but he holds onto, he maintains his integrity just as God had scolded the satan in chapter 2:3 which reads, "Still he holds onto his integrity. You have incited me to destroy him for nothing."

[83] So in his darkest, most bitter hour with all hope of reward gone, Job clings to the one thing he has — his own righteousness. In fact, when all hope of just reward is gone then righteousness becomes an intrinsic value. Yehezkel Kaufman writes of this moment, "the poet raises Job to the bleak summit of righteousness bereft of hope, bereft of faith in divine justice" [see note 4].

[84] Or in the words of another scholar, Moshe Greenberg, we see here

..the sheer heroism of a naked man, forsaken by his God and his friends and bereft of a clue to understand his suffering, still maintaining faith in the value of his virtue and in the absolute duty of man to be virtuous. The universe has turned its back on him. We may add he believes God has turned his back on him — yet Job persists in the affirmation of his own worth and the transcendent worth of unrewarded good [Greenberg 1987, 285].

[85] So in a way then, for all their differences in style and manner, the patient Job of the legend and the raging Job of the poetic dialogue, are basically the same man. Each ultimately remains firm in his moral character, clinging to righteousness because of its intrinsic value and not because it will be rewarded. Indeed, Job knows bitterly that it will not.

[86] At the end of his outburst, Job sues God. He issues Him a summons and he demands that God reveal to him the reason for his suffering. Job pronounces a series of curses to clear himself from the accusations against him, specifying the sins he has not committed and ending, as he began, in chapter 3, with a curse on the day of his birth.

[87] We expect to hear from God now but instead we hear from an unannounced stranger, Elihu. I'm going to have to give Elihu short shrift. He's the only one of the four interlocutors to refer to Job by name, address Job by name. He repeats many of the trite assertions of Job's friends. He does hint, however, that not all suffering is punitive. He also hints that contemplation of nature's elements can open the mind to a new awareness of God and in these two respects, Elihu's speech moves us towards God's answer from the storm.

7. *God's Response in the Book of Job*

[88] So in the climatic moment, God answers Job in an extraordinary theophany, or self-manifestation. In chapter 38 God speaks out of the tempest or whirlwind, "Who is this who darkens counsel, speaking without knowledge," is he referring to Job, to Elihu, the three friends, all of them? God has heard enough, it's his turn to ask questions, the answers to which are clearly implied; these are rhetorical questions.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Speak if you have understanding.

Do you know who fixed its dimensions

Or who measured it with a line?"

You did, God.

...Have you ever commanded the day to break,

Assigned the dawn its place,

...Have you penetrated to the sources of the sea,

Or walked in the recesses of the deep?

[89] No, no human has. And God continues with these rhetorical questions, questions regarding the animals, their various powers and attributes, but one wonders what the purpose of all these questions is.

[90] One senses that they are irrelevant. Job has posed some very specific challenges to God. Why am I suffering? Is there a pattern to existence? Is God's refusal to answer these challenges a way of saying there is no answer? Or is it God's way of saying that justice is beyond human understanding? Or is this

theophany of God in nature and the focus on creation, an implicit assault on the fundamental tenant of Israelite religion that God is known and made manifest through his interactions with humans, his rewards and punishments in historical time.

[91] You'll recall that the monotheistic revolution is generally understood to have effected a break from mythological conceptions of the gods as indistinguishable from various natural forces, limited by meta-divine powers and forces of the cosmos.

[92] The biblical God wasn't another Ancient Near Eastern or Canaanite nature God ultimately, but a wholly transcendent power — He was figured this way in many parts of the Bible — known not through the involuntary and recurring cycles of nature but through His freely willed and non-repeating actions in historical time. Such a view of God underwrites the whole system of divine retributive justice.

[93] Only an essentially good God who transcends and is unconstrained by mechanistic natural forces can establish and administer a system of retributive justice, dealing out punishment and reward in response to the actions of humans in time.

[94] Is the author of Job suggesting that history and the events that befall the just and the unjust are not the medium of revelation? Is God a god of nature after all, encountered in the repeating cycles of the natural world and not in the unpredictable and incoherent arena of human history and action? If so, then this is a third fundamental biblical assumption that has been radically subverted.

[95] So we'll turn now to God's direct speech to Job in 40:8, 40, verse 8, excuse me. "Would you impugn my justice? / Would you condemn Me that you be right?" God, I think, is now getting at the heart of the matter: your friends Job were wrong, they condemned you. They attributed sin to you, so that they might be right. But you, too, have been wrong condemning Me, attributing wickedness to Me so that you might be right.

[96] Job's friends erred because they assumed that there's a system of retributive justice at work in the world and that assumption led them to infer that all who suffer are sinful, and that's a

blatant falsehood. But Job also errs; if he assumes that although there isn't a system of retributive justice, there really ought to be one. It's that assumption that leads him to infer that suffering is a sign of an indifferent or wicked God, and that is equally a falsehood. Job needs to move beyond the anthropocentrism that characterizes the rest of Scripture and the Genesis 1 account of creation, according to which humankind is the goal of the entire process of creation.

[97] God's creation, the Book of Job seems to suggest, defies such teleological and rational categories. In a nutshell, God refuses to be seen as a moral accountant. The idea of God as a moral accountant is responsible for two major errors: the interpretation of suffering as an indicator of sin, or the ascription of injustice to God. In his final speech, Job confesses to a new firsthand knowledge of God that he lacked before, and as a result of this knowledge Job repents, "Therefore, I recant and relent, / Being but dust and ashes," 42:6.

[98] Here we see the other meaning of Job's name, "one who repents," suddenly leap to the fore. What is he repenting of? Certainly not of sin; God has not upheld the accusations against Job. Indeed he states explicitly in a moment that the friends were wrong to say he had sinned. But he has indicated that guilt and innocence, reward and punishment are not what the game is all about, and while Job had long been disabused of the notion that the wicked and the righteous actually get what they deserve, he nevertheless had clung to the idea that ideally they should. And it's that mistaken idea — the idea that led him to ascribe wickedness to God — that Job now recants. With this new understanding of God, Job is liberated from what he would now see as a false expectation raised by the Deuteronomistic notion of a covenant relationship between God and humankind, enforced by a system of divine justice.

[99] At the end of the story Job is fully restored to his fortunes. God asserts he did no evil and the conventional, impeccably Deuteronomistic view of the three friends is clearly denounced by God. He says of them, "They have not spoken of Me what is right as my servant Job has," 42:7. For some, the happy ending seems anticlimactic, a capitulation to the demand for a happy ending of just desserts that runs

counter to the whole thrust of the book, and yet in a way I think the ending is superbly fitting. It's the last in a series of reversals that subverts our expectations. Suffering comes inexplicably, so does restoration; blessed be the name of the Lord.

[100] God doesn't attempt to justify or explain Job's suffering and yet somehow by the end of the book, our grumbling, embittered, raging Job is satisfied. Perhaps he's realized that an automatic principle of reward and punishment would make it impossible for humans to do the good for purely disinterested motives. It's precisely when righteousness is seen to be absurd and meaningless that the choice to be righteous paradoxically becomes meaningful. God and Job, however we are to interpret their speeches, are reconciled.

[101] The suffering and injustice that characterize the world have baffled humankind for millennia. And the Book of Job provides no answer in the sense of an explanation or a justification of suffering and injustice, but what it does offer is a stern warning to avoid the Scylla of blaspheming against the victims by assuming their wickedness, and the Charybdis of blaspheming against God by assuming his. Nor is moral nihilism an option, as our hero, yearning for, but ultimately renouncing divine order and justice, clings to his integrity and chooses virtue for nothing.

[102] [end of transcript]

—

[103] Notes

[104] 1. Quotations marked RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. 2. Job excerpts from Good, Edwin, Edwin M. In *Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job, with a Translation*. Copyright (c) 1990 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. With the permission of Stanford University Press, <http://www.sup.org>

[105] 3. *Ibid.* This lecture is also deeply influenced by the wonderful essay on Job written by Moshe Greenberg. See reference below.

[106]4. Y. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. Moshe Greenberg, p. 335.

—

[107]References

[108]Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from “Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text.” Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the

transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

[109]Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 (2nd edition, 1971) by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

[110]Greenberg, Moshe. 1987. “Job” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 295.

(Hayes, 2006)

JOB

1:22 In all this Job did not sin or impute anything unsavory to God.

2:3 The Lord said to the Satan, " ... and still he *holds on to his integrity*, so you incited me to destroy him for nothing" (2:3).

2:9 His wife said to him, "Do you still *hold on to your integrity*? Curse God and die!"

2:10 In all this, Job did not sin with his lips.

9:17 " ... He wounds me much for nothing."

27:2-6 "By God who has deprived me of justice! By Shaddai who has embittered my life! As long as there is life in me, and God's breath is in my nostrils, **my lips will speak no wrong, nor my tongue utter deceit**. Far be it from me to say you are right; until I die I will *maintain my integrity*. I persist in my righteousness and will not yield; I shall be free of reproach as long as I live."

40:8 "Would you impugn my justice? Would you condemn me that you may be right?"

* * * * *

The assumption of a moral order, a system of retributive divine justice, leads to one of two errors:

Error 1: that suffering is a sign of sin

OR (if it is not, then)

Error 2: God is indifferent, wicked, unjust because he allows the innocent to suffer

Job's friends make error 1 - imputing sin where they see suffering. But Job is innocent and suffering "for nothing." God affirms this when he says that the friends have lied and Job has spoken what is true.

Job makes error 2 - impugns God's character or justice because the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper. But Job is equally mistaken.

Both mistakes are avoided if the initial assumption - of a moral order, a system of retributive divine justice - is abandoned. God is not a moral accountant. If he were then it would be impossible ever to do the right thing for its own sake. Only when the hope for just desserts is dead, can one act with full integrity, maintaining one's righteousness.

Copyright © 2007 Yale University. Some rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated on this document or on the Open Yale Courses web site, all content is licensed under a Creative Commons License (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0).

Open Yale courses

Copyright © 2011 Yale University. Some rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated on this document or on the Open Yale Courses website, all content is licensed under a Creative Commons License (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0).