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From Victim to Agent of Change:  
The Call to Co-creation in Job

by

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The book of Job echoes the feelings of countless people who experience despair and a sense of abject powerlessness in the face of suffering in the world. Like Job, believers and non-believers alike lash out at God for God's failure to prevent suffering and thus God's apparent, though inexplicable, complicity in it. Job's experience can also be understood in more generative ways. Although it is perhaps not immediately obvious, the book of Job offers a resource for empowering people and developing their resilience in the face of life's many challenges, both personal and societal. It calls forth the agency of human beings, created to be God's co-creators.<sup>1</sup>

As his troubles mount, Job himself has no inkling of being an agent of change. He sinks into ever deepening despair, lamenting his lack of agency (Job 6:13) and voice: "If I summoned him and he answered me I do not believe that he would listen to my voice" (Job 9:16 NRSV). He repeatedly describes his state of brokenness, using dramatic verbs of harm with God as the subject, no less. One particularly vivid example suffices: "I was at ease, and he broke me in two; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces" (Job 16:12).<sup>2</sup> Job sees himself as the object of God's destructive power. In this state, he seems utterly incapable of doing anything to change his situation, apart from mournfully complaining of his suffering and, later, the suffering of those who live on the margins of society in a similar state of wretchedness (Job 24:2–14). Most perplexing to many is Job's final reaction to God's two speeches. After struggling so persistently to

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<sup>1</sup> The description of human beings as God's "created co-creators" was coined by theologian Philip Hefner. See Philip J. Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Other examples include Job 9:17; 16:13–14; 30:18.

articulate his suffering, he seems to capitulate too easily, cowed by the display of God's greatness. Notwithstanding the seriousness of his accusations against God, he quickly admits that he has spoken out of turn—"I have uttered what I did not understand" (Job 42:3)—and collapses on the ash-heap of penitence without beginning to understand what he has done to provoke God's anger. The sudden dénouement of the story seems to offer no obvious encouragement to Job (or the reader) to take initiative to address suffering in the world and attempt to end it. On the contrary, Job's return to health and good fortune appears to be the result of his readiness to swallow his complaints and submit obediently to God's incomprehensible cosmic will.

The exploration of the themes of agency and co-creation in this paper roughly follows the structure of the book, beginning with the rather narrow assumptions about God, creation and humanity that underlie Job's exemplary life as presented in the prologue. Then, as Job descends into suffering, he can be seen to exercise agency through lament, refusing to accept his lot and daring to challenge God. God's response, in turn, articulates a greatly expanded understanding of agency as the capacity to co-create the world. Finally, glimpses of this new understanding of agency can be detected in the epilogue, with its invitation to humanity to live into the freedom of being God's co-creators in this world where suffering co-exists mysteriously with experiences of beauty and wonder.

The prologue presents Job as an exemplary figure, "one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Not only is his personal piety noteworthy, but he also cares in exceptional ways for the spiritual wellbeing of his family, making pre-emptive offerings on behalf of his children. Later in the book, Job boldly claims his reputation as

a righteous man: “I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban” (Job 29:14). He recalls how he used to be recognized for his conscientious championing of the poor (Job 29:11-17) in the diverse ways required by the law.<sup>3</sup> In an even stronger statement, Job makes a series of oaths attesting to his integrity before the law (Job 31:5–40), again emphasizing his compassionate treatment of the poor and marginalized (31:13–23). While one cannot help but admire Job’s willing and meticulous obedience, it suggests a scripted relationship with God, circumscribed by the law. Job follows God in the way in which he has been instructed to do so, just as his forebears have done before him.

With God’s law as his moral center, Job was the righteous pillar around which his family and community revolved (Job 29:21–25). It is probably safe to deduce that Job, as someone who placed God’s law at the center of his life, lived according to the assumption that humanity was similarly at the center of God’s attention, and that the rest of creation supported human wellbeing. When calamity strikes, Job’s anger and doubt erupt around two main themes. He questions God’s justice and the purpose of creation. After cursing the day of his birth and negating the fundamental life-giving dynamic of creation in Chapter 3, Job repeatedly questions God’s creative purposes. He asks, “Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the schemes of the wicked?” (Job 10:3). Gerald Janzen shows how Job inverts a common hymnic form in the Psalms, first praising God’s strength (Job 9:4), and then showing it to be “not creative and ordering, but destructive and bewildering (Job 9:5-10).”<sup>4</sup> Highlighting the fact that this inversion of creative power is situated in a chapter that focuses mainly on justice,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Lev 19:9; Deut 24:14, 17.

<sup>4</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 90. A similar inversion occurs in Job 12:13–25.

Janzen argues that the two themes are integrally related: creation is “the prior concern in which the concern for justice is embedded.”<sup>5</sup> However, it is the theme of justice that ultimately dominates Job’s laments, arising no doubt from his love of the law and his expectation, reinforced by his life experience thus far, that God will reward those who obey and punish those who do not.

The language of the courtroom appears throughout Job’s laments as he expresses his longing to argue his innocence before God. He cries out: “For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together” (Job 9:32). Later he exclaims: “But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God” (Job 13:3). Like his friends who are convinced that he must secretly have sinned in order to have been punished so severely, Job operates within a framework of retributive justice, or as Ellen Davis puts it, “a system of just deserts.”<sup>6</sup> However, his own experience of undeserved suffering leads him to believe that the system has gone awry:

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 innocent.  
 The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;  
                   he covers the eyes of its judges... (Job 9:22–24)

This obvious injustice is the source of Job’s anger towards God. He cannot understand why, as a righteous man, such suffering has come upon him. He does not expect this from the God whose ways he loves, and he is determined to hold God to the promises on which he has based his life. As Davis states, “Job rails against God, not as a skeptic, not

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001), 129.

as a stranger to God's justice, but as a believer."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the retributive mindset limits Job's understanding of God. Gutiérrez explains that Job's way of speaking about God in the laments makes God "a prisoner of a particular way of understanding justice."<sup>8</sup>

Job's impulse to cry out to God in anger is taken by some as a measure of agency. Janzen comments that Job's response to his situation, "in its departure from conventional models (as represented by the friends), may be said to be creative."<sup>9</sup> Instead of meekly accepting his lot, he pours out his heart in poetry—a creative act in itself—greatly offending his friends as he comes close to blasphemy. After some time, Job laments not only his own suffering, but begins to identify with others who suffer—widows, orphans, the needy, the dying and wounded (Job 24:2-12)—and who, like him, experience God's inexplicable neglect. Job exclaims angrily: "God pays no attention to their prayer" (Job 24:12). For Gutiérrez, this moment of identification with the poor is the crucial turning point in the book of Job. He remarks: "Job begins to free himself from an ethic centered on personal rewards and to pass to another focused on the needs of one's neighbor."<sup>10</sup> It is at this moment, according to Gutiérrez, that Job comes to understand "that this poverty and abandonment are not something fated but are caused by the wicked, who nonetheless live serene and satisfied lives."<sup>11</sup> For Gutiérrez, this reality must prompt resistance.

In the field of liberation theology, Job's outrage has inspired many to refuse the path of silence and instead show similar courage by raising their voices not only against God but also against earthly perpetrators of injustice. South African theologian Gerald

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>8</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 87.

<sup>9</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 199.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 32.

West describes the sense of empowerment experienced by people living with HIV and AIDS when they read the book of Job and then compose their own laments. He urges: “Together we must find a place for lament in the private and public realms of our context as we struggle with the God of life against the idols and forces of death.”<sup>12</sup> It is indeed possible to discern an agentic impulse in lament, one that not only begins to empower people, but also, as Davis argues, mysteriously breeds hope, “hope that someone (Someone?) is listening and might care.”<sup>13</sup> However, lament also creates a trap from which it can be difficult to escape.

Lament, seen as a cry for freedom from oppression, is based on the assumption that the one who suffers needs to be rescued. Job pins his hope on meeting God in the courtroom and receiving a verdict in his favor. In the legal system, help comes from the outside. Once an offender has been convicted and proven guilty, it is the duty of the powers-that-be to mete out justice by punishing the wicked and raising up the victim. Another version of this rescue mentality is demonstrated by wealthy people who are moved by the plight of the poor. They express solidarity with those who suffer by echoing their lament and lending a helping hand, all too often in a condescending and piecemeal fashion. Such acts of solidarity and service usually have the effect of reinforcing the power of the powerful and eroding the agency of the weak. God’s response to Job, when God eventually speaks, presents a challenge to Job—and through him, to humanity—to move beyond lament and exercise greater agency, in a far larger landscape, in the face of the world’s many problems.

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<sup>12</sup> Gerald West, “The Poetry of Job as a Resource for the Articulation of Embodied Lament in the Context of Hiv and Aids in South Africa,” in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, ed. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 214.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, 131.

After all the strenuous effort that Job puts into challenging God to meet him in the courtroom, laying the charge of injustice against God and begging to plead his case, it is striking that God evades the challenge, as well as Job's questions about justice. Instead, as Robert Alter explains, "God chooses for His response to Job the arena of creation, not the court of justice. [...] And it is, moreover, a creation that barely reflects the presence of man, a creation where human concepts of justice have no purchase."<sup>14</sup> While it is true that humankind is merely peripheral in the vision that God reveals to Job, it is important to note that humankind is fully present as God's interlocutor, in the person of Job. Janzen comments: "This means that Job (or humankind generally) is not, as some have concluded, so insignificant a creature as to be overlooked in the general cosmic picture. Rather, humankind is that part of creation whom God addresses with questions concerning the rest of creation."<sup>15</sup> However grandiose the divine speeches may seem—God is God, after all—they are addressed directly to Job. And although God skirts the issue of justice, God *does* respond to Job's doubts about God's creative purposes and "God's rule of creation," as Kathryn Schifferdecker notes.<sup>16</sup> Also, God's reply to Job shows remarkable responsiveness at the level of poetic expression, with repeated echoes of the words and metaphors used earlier by Job, as Alter analyzes at length.

Significantly, instead of providing Job with explicit answers, God responds to him in the first speech with a lengthy string of questions. The second divine speech contains several questions too, although the overall tone is more declarative. At the beginning of both speeches, God says to Job: "Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Theological Studies, Harvard Divinity School, 2008), 75.

you declare to me” (Job 38:3; 40:7). God looks forward to robust interaction with Job and summons him to gather his thoughts and strength. Feisty though the lamentations of Job may have been, he is being called to more! God proceeds to bombard him with three main questions<sup>17</sup>—Who is this? Where were you? Can you?—reiterating the second two questions from numerous different angles. Janzen’s insight that God’s questions function at two levels is illuminating: “the level of the questions taken as rhetorical questions and therefore as a form of assertion; and the level of the questions taken as genuine, once their supposedly rhetorical character has been seen to be subverted by their ironic tone.”<sup>18</sup> Thus the divine speeches are both confrontational and invitational.

God’s speeches can be read as a challenge to Job to exercise his role as God’s created co-creator. First, God challenges Job to reconsider his dark, anti-creational stance expressed in Chapter 3, asking, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2). Then God implicitly calls Job to account for what he has been up to while God has been about the work of creation, from the laying the foundations of the earth (Job 38:4) to fathering the sustaining rains of the present (Job 38:28). Where has Job been, God enquires, and, by implication, what has he been doing with his life in this time? Finally, God asks Job if he is able to do a series of impossible things: command the stars and the weather, count and nourish the wild animals, and so on. God knows that Job cannot do these things, but there is an implied question: “Well then, what *can* you do?” God expects Job to take up the space that has been given to him to participate in the work of creation. As Janzen puts it, “To be a human being is to be a

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<sup>17</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 230.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

creature who is yet God's addressee and whom God confronts with the rest of creation *vocationally*.”<sup>19</sup> Human beings are created and called to be God's co-workers in creation.

In the second speech, God instructs Job to assume once again the kingly role of which he was stripped: “Deck yourself with majesty and dignity” (Job 40:10).<sup>20</sup> There is a trace of violence in the imperatives that follow: “Look on all who are proud and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand” (Job 40:12). This suggests that in the wild creation described by God, and particularly in the face of Behemoth and Leviathan, a robust or even violent approach might at times be required. However, as Janzen observes, the divine speeches also intimate that “true royalty engages ‘proud’ power otherwise than by brute force.”<sup>21</sup>

At this point, Job is a broken man, ostracized from society and hardly up to facing monsters. Earlier, he evocatively summarized his state of marginalization saying, “I am a brother of jackals, and a companion of ostriches” (Job 30:29). This is the man whom God is now urging to *rehabilitate himself*. Here Job receives a word of encouragement from God to face once again those who have taunted him—monsters of another kind—and to put them in their place, exercising agency in a new and more powerful way. God is calling on Job to help re-order the world according to the principles of justice that he holds dear. This is an important part of Job's co-creative work. God says, “Then I will also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory” (Job 40:14). Human beings might not be able to do the same creative work as God, but they can do a lot nevertheless.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 229. My italics.

<sup>20</sup> See Job 29:25 for Job's evocation of his former “kingly” status in his community.

<sup>21</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 244.

In the book of Job, God calls on humanity to move beyond complaint and lament to action, even in the direst of situations. This echoes the reading by the Latin American feminist theologian, Elsa Tamez. She addresses Job directly:

Now, friend Job, you have really known God. You will never be the same after this experience of pain. You will never go back to being that rich man to whom everything was handed on a plate, who gave to have-nots out of what he had left over. You have known the essence of the wretched, and no one will be able to erase that experience from your story. ... What will you do now? God reinstated you—and us? We await you down among the ashes.<sup>22</sup>

Tamez challenges Job to use his newfound freedom to help free others from their misery. Rejecting charitable interventions from the outside, she calls upon Job (and all other agents of change) to join in solidarity with the poor in their concrete situation, “among the ashes.” What Job will do there, arising out of his new understanding of God and his new self-understanding? The final words of Job’s second response to God, according to the translation proposed by Davis, are extremely significant: “Therefore I recant, and change my mind regarding the human condition (dust and ashes)” (Job 42:6).<sup>23</sup> Job not only withdraws the critique which he leveled at God, but also admits that his lamentation was an insufficient response, even though it moved him in the right direction and enabled him to know God in a new way. According to Gutiérrez, Job does not actually recant, but he moves beyond blame and protest: “Job is rejecting the attitude of lamentation that has been his until now. The speeches of God have shown him that this attitude is not justified. He does not retract or repent of what he has hitherto said, but he now sees clearly that he cannot go on complaining.”<sup>24</sup> Embracing his new understanding of the

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<sup>22</sup> Elsa Tamez, “From Father to the Needy to Brother of Jackals and Companion of Ostriches: A Meditation on Job,” in *Job's God*, ed. Ellen van Wolde, Concilium 4 (London, UK: SCM Press, 2004), 108.

<sup>23</sup> Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, 141.

<sup>24</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 87.

human condition and the role of humankind in creation, Job will henceforth act more boldly.

The epilogue very briefly narrates how Job “lives into” his freedom following his dramatic interaction with God. With his fortunes not simply restored but doubled, he is blessed indeed. It is fair to speculate that he does deal differently with the poor, as Tamez demands of him, but the text only provides two rather surprising details of his newfound agency. First, he breaks with convention, giving pretty, fanciful names to his daughters. Even more significantly, he gives them an inheritance along with their brothers (Job 42:14–15). While presumably still a model of righteousness in his community, he now does not allow his every move to be scripted either by the law or by tradition. He discovers the freedom to do new things!

The shift from protest to agency—empowered, transformative action in the world—is essential for us as humans as we strive to deal with suffering, both in our own lives and in our societies. Making this shift is surprisingly difficult. People are far more prone to clamor for freedom *from* their woes, waiting for help to come from the outside—whether in the form of comfort and aid from family and friends, professional assistance, government intervention or, mysteriously, from God—than to claim and exercise their own freedom *to* change their situation. This demands of those who feel called to work with the poor to do so in empowering ways, not taking it upon themselves to speak on behalf of voiceless and advocate ready-made solutions (much activism starts and stops here), but rather helping to equip the poor to speak and act for themselves, moving beyond protest towards the co-creation of a better society.

A suggestive story of such co-creation can be drawn from the Pentateuch. After departing from Egypt, the Israelites struggle to move from an “Exodus” mindset to a new, collaborative “covenant” mindset. This represents a shift from focusing on liberation from oppression—the main emphasis of liberation theology—to constructing a new way of life together, in freedom. Gutiérrez’s emphasis on the principle of gratuitous love provides a starting point. God’s uninhibited, gratuitous love for every aspect of creation in all its exuberance and wildness, not only for humanity, is exemplified in the divine speeches addressed to Job. God does as God lovingly pleases, and cannot be held to account by any human moral calculus. Gutiérrez finds in the book of Job “the loving and completely free meeting of two freedoms, the divine and the human.”<sup>25</sup> However, as argued above, following the revelation of God’s creative freedom, Job—and with him, the rest of humanity—is also called to do more than Gutiérrez demands. Gutiérrez calls for a focus on the needs of the neighbor and the struggle for justice. Co-creative freedom entails doing “world-building” work as well. It is the freedom to act constructively in the world. Attention to issues of injustice is one creative response, but so too, as the epilogue shows, are actions like prayer and worship, parenting and nurturing family relationships, and renewing established systems like inheritance laws to adapt to changing contexts. In an atmosphere of gratuitous love, all constructive human endeavor contributes towards the ongoing co-creation of the world. In the epilogue, Job begins to show the way.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4.

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