

Summer 2011

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Kathryn M. Schifferdecker
Luther Seminary, kschiffer@luthersem.edu

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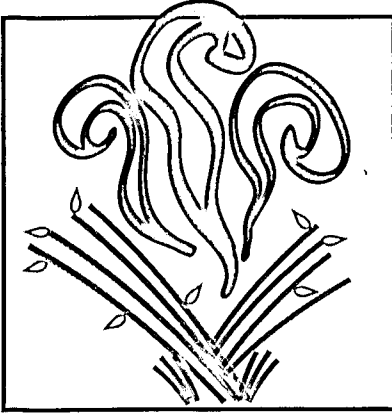
Schifferdecker, Kathryn M., "Job's Speech About and To God" (2011). *Faculty Publications*. 40.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/40

Published Citation

Schifferdecker, Kathryn M. "Job's Speech about and to God." *Lutheran Forum* 45, no. 2 (2011): 13–15.

JOB'S SPEECH ABOUT AND TO GOD

Kathryn Schifferdecker



The story is told of Elie Wiesel that, during his time in Auschwitz as a youth, he participated in a trial conducted by three Jewish scholars, masters of Talmud and Halakhah. The defendant? God. The charge? Crimes against humanity. Over the course of several nights, witnesses were called and evidence was gathered. On the final evening, the three judges issued a unanimous verdict: the LORD God, creator of heaven and earth, was found “guilty.”

And then, after what Wiesel describes as an “infinity of silence,” the Talmudic scholar looked at the sky and said, “It’s time for evening prayers,” and the members of the tribunal recited Maariv, the evening service.¹

That those three Jewish scholars prayed to the God Whom they had just found guilty of crimes against humanity is astonishing but not altogether unexpected. After all, they stand in a long line of Israelite and Jewish (and sometimes Christian) believers whose faith has found expression in the form of the lament, a line of believers who have held on to God with one hand and shaken their fist at God with the other. Near the beginning of that long line stands Job.

Job the Patient and Job the Impatient?

The book of Job, as many have noted, is a complex work, theologically and literarily. Indeed, its literary form contributes to the difficulty of understanding its theology. For one thing, the Job of the poetic dialogue (chapters 3–37) bears little resemblance to the Job of the prose prologue (chapters 1–2) of the book. The Job of the prologue refuses to accuse God of wrongdoing. Instead, he responds to incomprehensible loss with a doxology: “YHWH gave and YHWH has taken away; blessed be the name of YHWH”² (Job 1:21).³ By contrast, the Job of the dialogue accuses God in harsh and sometimes shocking language.

I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain
in the bitterness of my soul.

Am I the Sea or the Dragon, that you set a guard over
me?...

What are human beings, that you make so much of
them, that you set your mind on them,
Visit them every morning, test them every moment?
Will you not look away from me for a while, let me
alone until I swallow my spit?
If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
(Job 7:11–12, 17–20)

The mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is
removed from its place;
The waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash
away the soil of the earth;
So you destroy the hope of mortals. (Job 14:18–19)

The contrast between the Job of the prologue and the Job of the dialogue is so striking that many modern scholars have hypothesized that the book has at least two distinct layers, what H. L. Ginsberg calls the books of “Job the Patient” and “Job the Impatient.”⁴ The first is the original folktale, which is found now primarily in chapters 1–2 and 42:7–17. The latter consists of the poetic dialogue that the author of the present book inserted into the folktale to address the issue of undeserved suffering.

In the original form of the story, Job (like Abraham) is tested by God and passes the test with flying colors. His friends, like his wife, urge him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9). The friends’ original speeches (so goes the hypothesis) have disappeared from the final form of the book.⁵ We can speculate about what they said, however, by paying attention to God’s rebuke of them at the end of the book.

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.” (Job 42:7–8)

This speech by God presents the reader with a conundrum. Namely, the speech is difficult to reconcile with the poetic dialogue that has preceded it. This is the case both in its depiction of the friends and in its depiction of Job. The friends, good theologians that they are, have spoken about God in very orthodox ways by ancient Israelite standards. They have sounded, in fact, a lot like other biblical writers, echoing books like Deuteronomy and Proverbs. They have consistently argued that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. Why, then, does God chastise them in the end? Perhaps, the hypothesis goes, they are chastised not because of what they have said about God in the dialogue but because of speeches that we no longer have in the book, speeches in which they accuse God of wrongdoing and urge Job to do the same.

It is also difficult to reconcile this divine approbation of Job—that is, that he has spoken rightly about God—with what Job has actually said of God in the dialogue. He has accused God of perverting justice and creating chaos. Indeed, God has chastised Job for his words just a few chapters earlier: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:1), an accusation that Job does not deny: “Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). Granted, Job repents or recants in 42:1–6, but how can that short speech be described as speaking rightly about God, when Job has previously said so many harsh things about God in the dialogue?

Perhaps it is the case, then, as Ginsberg and others would have it, that YHWH is speaking in 42:7–8 about Job the Patient, the Job of the prologue, rather than Job the Impatient, who hurls such stunning accusations at God in the dialogue. Perhaps it is the case that we have here a literary and theological conundrum that can be solved only by dividing the book into two distinct historical layers. The Job who accuses God (Job the Impatient)

is reprimanded and repents. It is only the Job who does not lament or accuse (Job the Patient) who is commended in the end.

Job and Lament

I do not wish to argue against the validity of the historical-critical argument outlined above. It seems plausible that the compositional history of the Book of Job included the combining of two or more distinct stories into one. Such a hypothesis, however, does justice neither to the Israelite lament tradition of which Job is a part nor to the final form of the book—that is, the form that we use in Christian (and Jewish) proclamation.

If it is only Job the Patient who is commended by God in the end, then the honest and heartrending laments of Job in the poetic core of the book are to be dismissed out of hand. If it is only Job the Patient who is commended, then we can safely ignore the poetic core of the book and exhort our parishioners, when they are faced by suffering, to exhibit only “the patience/endurance of Job” (James 5:11).⁶

Such a reading of the book, however, ignores the final, canonical form of the book, the only form of the book we have. It also ignores the rich legacy of lament that we have inherited from ancient Israel. Job, like the psalmists and the prophets, holds God to account. Job calls on God “to close the gap between his reputation and his current behavior.”⁷ Job does not let God “off the hook” out of fear or misguided piety; neither does Job give up on God and turn his back, as perhaps some moderns are inclined to do. Rather, Job, in the tradition of ancient Israel, laments. He complains, he gets angry at God, he accuses God, he calls on God to act, and he never, ever lets go of his relationship with God. He holds on to God with one hand and shakes his fist at God with the other.

That Job does indeed hold on to God can be seen in two significant characteristics of his speeches in the

dialogue. Job begins his speeches with a curse on the day of his birth in chapter 3. He wishes that he had never been born or that he had died at birth. Job continues to long at times for death (7:21, 10:18–19), but more and more as the dialogue progresses, he longs instead for justice and for an audience with God (10:2, 13:20–22, 14:13–15, 23:3–10, 31:35). He wants to *see* God (19:27). Likewise, Job moves from speaking *about* God at the beginning of the dialogue to speaking more and more *to* God. This movement begins in chapter 7, when he turns from speaking to his friends and begins to address God directly.

Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good...

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?...

Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be. (Job 7:7, 12, 20–21)

This speech of Job *to* God continues throughout the dialogue, interspersed with dialogue with his friends *about* God. But finally, at the end of the dialogue, the friends are silenced, and Job’s last words are a long oath, calling on God to speak to *him*: “Let the Almighty answer me!” (Job 31:35). And in the divine speeches of chapters 38–41, Job’s direct speech to God is indeed answered by God’s address to him.⁸ After the divine speeches, Job acknowledges that his hope has been fulfilled: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5).

The direct address to God is one fundamental characteristic of the lament form. The lament, whether individual or communal, calls on God directly: “O LORD,” “My God, my God.” This address is accompa-

nied by strong emotions—fear, anger, grief—and by demands that strike many Christians as impious, such as in Psalm 35: “You have seen, O LORD; do not be silent! O LORD, do not be far from me! Wake up!” (vv. 22–23). However strong the anger, though, however harsh the accusation, the speaker speaks it directly to God and, in that way, stays in relationship with God.

A Second Look

Noting this characteristic of Job’s speeches, we can turn with new eyes to God’s words at the end of the book, God’s commendation of Job and His condemnation of Job’s friends. All the major English translations render God’s accusation of Eliphaz and his friends in a similar way: “You have not spoken of me what is right, as has my servant Job.”⁹ The problem with this translation is that the preposition translated “of me” is the preposition *’el*, which usually does not mean “of” or “about.” Though Hebrew prepositions carry a lot of different meanings, the preposition *’el* most often means “to.” In fact, the same preposition is used in this passage three other times (twice with verbs of speaking) and every time clearly in its usual sense of “to.” Making this adjustment to the translation, we have a different impression of Job’s conclusion.

After YHWH had spoken these words *to* Job, YHWH said *to* Eliphaz the Temanite, “I am angry with you and with your two friends, for you have not spoken *to* me rightly, as has my servant Job. Now take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams and go *to* my servant Job and offer them as a burnt offering for yourselves. Job my servant will pray for you, for I will regard him and not deal with you according to your folly, for you have not spoken *to* me rightly, as has my servant Job.” (42:7–8, my translation)

Such a translation of the passage is supported both by its grammar and

by the poetic dialogue that precedes it. We have already noted that Job moves from speaking *about* God to speaking *to* God. What we have not yet noted is that his friends *never* make that move. Here’s the striking thing about the friends’ long speeches: though they urge Job to turn to God in repentance, though they urge Job to pray, they themselves never once address God directly. They never intercede with God for their suffering friend, and for that failing, it is Job who is called upon in the end to intercede for them.

Such a reading of this passage helps to resolve the theological and literary difficulties discussed above. Job is not necessarily commended for what he said *about* God—he himself admits that he spoke “without understanding”—but for the fact that he spoke *to* God. In the midst of unspeakable suffering, Job continued to address God directly, continued to stay in relationship with him; and for that he was rewarded, not just materially but through an encounter with the living God.

Job stands in the long line of the faithful who have held on to God in the midst of suffering, whose faith has found honest expression in lament. That line includes the psalmists, the prophets, the rabbis, and Jesus himself (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, Hebrews 5:7). The direct address of God, the speaking *to* God, is one essential component of the lament and is to be commended to anyone who is experiencing suffering—which is to say, all of us, at one time or another. Anger and grief have their place in the life of faith, but they are best brought into the direct dialogue between the sufferer and God in the voice of lament.

I have described lament as holding on to God with one hand and shaking our fist at God with the other. As believers we face God and address God directly with the honest expression of our feelings. But one thing more remains to be said. If we take the scriptural witness as our guide, then lament is not the final word. Life is. When believers have moved through lament to new life on the other side—

which is what Job does—we find that we have never, in fact, been alone. We find that it is God, all along, who has been holding on to us. And for that, we are finally ready to give thanks. ✠

KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Notes

1. Robert McAfee Brown, “Introduction,” in Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York: Schocken, 1995), vii.

2. I do not vocalize the divine name out of deference to the Jewish tradition of not pronouncing that name.

3. All quotations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated. Job is perhaps less pious in his second response, which takes the form of a question rather than a statement: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10). After this second response, the narrator says, “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” instead of the earlier “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing” (1:22). The difference in the statements was noted by the rabbis of the Talmud (*b. Baba Batra* 15a) as well as by subsequent interpreters. For a nuanced discussion of the ambiguity of Job’s second response, see Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 59–65.

4. H. L. Ginsberg, “Job the Patient and Job the Impatient,” *Conservative Judaism* 21 (1967): 12–28.

5. *Ibid.*, 15.

6. A few years ago, I heard a television evangelist do just that in a sermon on Job. He did not even mention chapters 3 to 41. Instead, he told his listeners that if they were patient in suffering and offered what they had to God (through his ministry), they would receive, like Job, a double portion of what they had owned before.

7. Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994), 24. Levenson here is describing the theology of the laments in Psalms 74 and 89 and in Isaiah 51, but the description is apt for Job as well.

8. A discussion of the divine speeches is outside the scope of this article. For an overview of their history of interpretation and for my own reading of the divine speeches, see my book, *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2008).

9. The NIV, RSV, NRSV, ESV, KJV, NAB, NET, and Tanakh all translate the preposition as “of,” “about,” or “concerning.”