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Theodicy in the Book of Job

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THEODICY IN THE BOOK OF JOB

By

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This thesis may be duplicated.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Job deals with the problem of suffering, the age old question, “Why do the innocent suffer?” This paper will not explore the problem of theodicy so much in the book of Job as the question, “How can we cope with suffering?” I will connect Job with current life in Kenya, then draw a conclusion as to how one might cope with suffering. The first hurdle is to explain the reality of God’s character of greatness and his works of wisdom. The second item is to contend with the fact that Job illustrates our weakness, sinfulness, ignorance and the shortness of our lives. Despite the truth that God’s mind, intelligence and purpose are described for us, as being naturally beyond our reach; God, “said to humankind, ‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom (הַיִּרְאָה); and to depart from evil is understanding (בִּינָה)’” (Job 28:28).¹ Hence, like Job, we are availed the lament as a means of raising questions to God during worship, and by so doing, we stand a chance of hearing and receiving directions on how we might cope during dire situations.

In Kenya most of the communities from Nyanza and Western province are known for their rich laments. They use laments to communicate their grievances to the Creator with the expectation of receiving God’s intervention and help. Job ascribes to this when

¹ All translations of the Bible in this paper are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), unless otherwise stated.

he says, “Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high. My friends scorn me; my eye pours out tears to God” (Job 16:19-20). Going by the understanding of the author of Deutero-Isaiah, that the Lord’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways His ways (Isa 55:8), then it is quite true that, only as we begin to submit to God do we begin to understand a little of His ways.

The role expected of the wider community is to shoulder the responsibility of comforting the suffering. There is absolutely no doubt that Job is in pain, but he seems to give answers to his own questions from such a conclusive remark, “For I know that my Redeemer (גֹּאֲלִי) lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth” (Job 19:25). His rashness portrays him as one who purports to know it all even more than God does. This is captured in the words of the strong lament, “Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 7:11). The community listens to the prayerful message in the laments to empathize with the suffering and so perceive meaning in offering comfort and assistance to those in pain and suffering.

Pain and challenge are a reality of life despite the fact that we are all God’s people. The audacity is that one must first come to grips with such truth, and thereafter prepare to meet and counter challenges. I am certain it is during these times of pain and challenge that we require protection and strength, the more to maintain fellowship and sustain our spiritual life. Yes, God gives blessings (בְּרָכוֹת), offers prosperity and judgment to the wicked. However, one must guard against the tendency of automatically using this argument to validate that suffering must purely be a result of sins committed. Crisis might not necessarily provide us with an alternative, but it sure avails us the chance

to really make use of faith by simply showing trust in God the omniscient. It is envisaged that God sometimes takes away all the props we lean on so that we fall back on Him. Although we can sometimes see God's purpose in our suffering, His ways are higher than ours that His full purpose is always beyond our understanding.

Structure of this paper

This paper will look at five issues beginning with the main point, "suffering is part of life." Then it will follow the progression of drawing parallels between loss in Job and in Kenya, the effect of external force against suffering, how to cope with suffering, and how restoration is brought about by the Creator. In this thesis I argue that the book of Job can provide us with answers to the question, "What should be our response to suffering?"

The problem of theodicy has troubled people for ages. It is to this effect that the author of Job unveils to his readers some graphic design of the good, powerful, gracious, and merciful God. Though God appears great, the challenge emanates from a contrasting background, an environment rife with evil. Such a background of questionable happenings catapults us to question the role of God in suffering. Pursuing this quest we are bound to plunge head on into the problem of, "Theodicy in the Book of Job." The scene is more complicated when the mood of the situation intertwines with colors of the righteous and God-fearing, Job who finds self entangled in the evil of induced loss, pain and suffering. How can we find harmony in an otherwise hopeless situation reminiscent to the character of the biblical Job?

How should we respond to suffering?

Piety is what the character of Job is meant to display. He characterizes the utmost uprightness of a pious person persistently clinging to righteousness. The biblical Job, “was blameless and upright (יָשָׁר) one who fears God and turns away from evil,” though simply put, a keen scrutiny proves that there is none like him on earth! The Lord speaks of Job as, “A person who will still persist in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason” (Job 1:1b, 8b; 2:3). Job’s piety goes hand in hand with knowledge and performance. Job is actively engaged in religious duties comprising sanctification rites of offering burnt offerings very early in the mornings. Why, then, should a person who is knowledgeable and of good deeds undergo such intense suffering? Does Job then, “fear God for nothing?” I bet no one willingly prefers to take Job’s position in the suffering.

In Job the patriarch, is vested the duty to say prayers of supplication for his children in case they are found to have, “sinned and cursed God in their heart” (Job 1:5). These are qualities reminiscent of a person who does not take any chances but instead is detailed and committed, such people one would quip “do not even trust themselves.” The general expectation of the community for such righteous people is that they stand a better chance of being exonerated from any impending judgment. In that, just like Job, they would be seen to exhibit qualities of a good, caring, and responsible person. It is therefore mind boggling when we the readers of Job later on realize the magnitude of the planned and untold suffering that unfolds in the book. Since the book of Job has leanings of utopia in that it moves toward peace, happiness or happy endings, then maybe it is high time we rephrase the question to read, “Why are the pious righteous?”

Suffering spans a wide spectrum to include loss of property or wealth, employment, family members, and declining health. All these directly affect the whole being, immediate family, relatives, neighboring community and the wider society. In such challenging times the human intellect is engaged to pry and search for meaning in the suffering. It is common to hear those who have been hit with loss and are in pain ponder, “Why should this happen to me?” This is exactly what disturbed, unhappy, and disoriented Job grapples with when suddenly calamity befalls him. He skillfully portrays some harsh reaction but coated in the words of the following lament, “I am a laughingstock to my friends; I who called upon God and he answered me, a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock” (Job 12:4). The comment that, “loss is loss” has some parallelism with the Kiswahili saying that, “Spilt milk cannot be drawn from the ground again.” Whether such loss results from natural calamity like; hurricane, tornado, drought, earthquake, floods, and storms, or is man made; the naked truth is that suffering can come to one without notice and bias. It is within such a situation of loss, pain and suffering that the book of Job embarks on the positive avenue to instill hope for a heart broken world.

Parallels can be drawn between loss in Job and the human conditions or experiences people go through in Kenya. Like most parts of the world, Kenya does experience her share of natural calamities. Here suffering grows from loss during drought, floods, senseless killings during tribal or political embattlement, diseases and epidemics like HIV/AIDS, cattle rustling, carjacking, robberies, burglarythe list is endless. Such comparisons can easily be drawn but it were better for one to put in place means and ways to arrive at lasting solutions as to how one can cope with suffering. It is

natural and common to expect and experience some initial confusion during calamity. Though this is inevitable, such a situation must not be allowed to follow an indefinite flow. Since prolonged suffering can cause more destruction and put one's integrity at jeopardy, then I find it quite relevant that people ought to be taught about the basics of disaster management. Training on safe, swift and orderly response during emergencies must take priority. Job tries very hard to overcome, if not cope with, suffering when he painfully, "Persists in his integrity" (Job 2:3b). The problem is he does not convince the people he is in dialogue with but the consolation is that he has hope in the Creator when he says, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25).

God is the creator yet there is inexplicable suffering on earth. What then can we make of this intricate balance of the reality in life? Well, the best would be to cope like Job, who I imagine, after realizing that God created humanity and controls life had to accept and come to terms with the loss of his wealth and death of all his children. One finds some assurance in the God who creates ex-nihilo, "the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves" by just saying, "let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind" (Gen 1:21, 24) and creation takes place. God later commends the goodness (חסיד) in creation and gives special attention to humanity because, "God created humankind in His image" (Gen 1:26). This is not what life entails for at times we compare well with the hen that has lost all her chicks to the kite! We are bound to be left without any choice but surrender, like Job does when he acknowledges God into his predicament by saying, "the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). In Kenya we say, "Leave everything to the Creator." I think it

matters how we express these feelings, the best way is through the lament in worship.

The Psalter puts it more clearly in these words, “Turn (שׁוּבָה), O LORD, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love” (Ps 6:4).

God is the giver of life to all living things, especially human beings whose life is specifically given in the beginning when, “The Lord God formed man from the dust (אֲפֶרֶת) of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7). In Kenya life is very precious and so valued that women who are pregnant are accorded respect and treated with great care. They are discouraged from performing heavy tasks such as lifting heavy loads. The reality that blood is life and needs to be protected is implied when the Lord says to Cain, “Listen your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground” (Gen 4:10). Despite the fact that Cain had killed his brother Abel, God still goes ahead to protect the remaining life, “And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him” (Gen 4:15b).

Human moral responsibility has to be maintained even in times of challenges. The Lord allows the challenge of the Satan who is in doubt whether, “Job will fear God without the rewards of wisdom.”² And allows the accuser to try Job but with some caution, “Only do not stretch your hand against him!” (Job 1:12b). Restrictions have the positive side in that they can be put into place to maintain harmony, help us to avoid as well as guard against evil. I find some relevance here with what most Kenyan community norms entail. Taking human life is a taboo, be it in battle or by accident. One is required to undergo cleansing before being reaccepted into society. Even when one commits suicide by hanging oneself, the type of burial is void of any ceremonial rites. It is the

² Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin (eds), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1992), 25.

responsibility of every member to uphold societal norms. Going against tradition is a taboo and those who break the morals of society are looked down upon with scorn. Therefore, it is prudent that most members of society strive to maintain and participate in upholding harmony within the community.

Integrity is crucial in order for one to live and lead a holistic life. Truth and doing right are the two key factors of integrity. Job points to this when he says, “My lips will not speak falsehood. I hold fast my righteousness (אֲצִדִיק) and will not let it go” (Job 27:4-6). The Kiswahili name, ‘Fadhili’ meaning integrity (*adili*) is given to those practicing upright living in both private and social life. Such people are accorded high respect and become role models to many. Indeed, one would easily agree with Perdue who says that, “Job is a model of success, the perfect sage.”³ We have had persons set such good examples in the history of the world like Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who lived a humble life of high integrity full of wisdom and discernment.

It is the assertion of this paper that the book of Job can provide us with answers to the question, “How should we respond to suffering?” We are bound to ask ourselves first the question, what happens when intense suffering occurs inexplicably? The best option is to offer prayers of lament to our Creator, “Turn, O LORD, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love” (Ps 6:4). Therefore, the character of Job points us to the reality of taking the Psalms of lament more seriously and meaningfully for they are a spiritual pedestal for us to step on when responding to loss.

³ Perdue and Gilpin (eds), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job*, 25.

CHAPTER 2

LOSS IN JOB AND IN KENYA

Friendship embraces repentance

Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, argue that in order for us to end suffering (רעה) repentance of sin (חטא) must be embraced. The author of Job proceeds to show that though calamity, loss and subsequent suffering are caused by natural or human agents, suffering must not be construed as a consequence of sin. Just like what would happen in Kenya during loss, people visit, witness and get first-hand information from the ground or the affected persons. I am persuaded and hence inclined to fall in step with Job's friends who take the initiative to, "bring their traditional wisdom to comfort Job and interpret his plight."¹ The next step to take is to avert further pain or to offer and put in place means to cope with the new situation. Here is where friends can play a major role. Most communities in Kenya and indeed other parts of the world rely on friendship to facilitate truth and reconciliation. In the case of Job, purification and repentance were the avenues of addressing and possibly halting further suffering.

The Luhyia community in Kenya has a belief that sin causes suffering, so people try as much as they can to avoid falling into sin, for the consequences are that the evil can extend from the individual, family members to the whole clan! I find Job's friends pursue

¹ Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1985), 97.

the same line of thought when they see that, “He was guilty and therefore responsible for the evils that had befallen him.”² Sin is construed as a part of life, similar to soiling one’s garments after a slip and ensuing fall while walking with close friends on a muddy path. The friends will naturally laugh, without malice at the one who has fallen then go ahead to offer assistance. Falling into sin does not allow one to continue wallowing in the ‘mud’ but to wake up, stretch out and clasp the hand of help that is proffered to them. This is like reading the words of the Psalm, “he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake” (Ps 23:3).

Good friendship is easily detected through feelings of compassion and empathy extended to the person who is in a state of pain due to loss. True friends are handy; they are spoken of as, “a friend who can die for you.” At times such a good friend is sought after when it comes to addressing personal problems that demand confidentiality. Hence, true friends have the responsibility to know and visit their fellow friends who are suffering. The family and community have a reason to query the whereabouts of one’s friends in times of need. Though anyone can trip and fall, I am totally in agreement with the Luhya saying that, ‘the one who is of help values you,’ for only after a fall can true friends be known. They might not have much to offer, but they will definitely be at hand and are easily relied upon to unearth the root of the problem.

Seclusion from society raises people’s eyebrows, but interdependence between individuals makes up a thriving community. The members interact and show concern for each other, especially during loss and abundance. The community expects invitation, involvement and sharing in its members’ sad and happy moments. What affects the

² Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God – Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, New York : Orbis Books, 1988), 69.

individual has some effect on the wider community; to the extent that suffering negates confidentiality but invites community or an external force to take over and oversee how remedy, healing, reconciliation, truth, peace, justice and restoration can be achieved. Just as expected of friends, Job's good friends' response portray that any good, loyal and faithful friend would not desert a fellow friend who is knee deep in suffering. So it is good to have good company and 'walk' with good friends who are ready to reprimand and correct on the spot!

Comfort has one main target, to alleviate pain through the provision of physical needs, while compassion addresses emotional concerns of those in pain. Friendship knows no distance so Job's friends come from far off lands of diverse localities of Edom, the land of 'the East' and the home area of Naama. They come to console by saying a lament and expressing how sorry they are for the calamity that has befallen one of their own. This diversity indicates that suffering has no geographical boundaries. I concur with Vanhoozer's argument that, "true friends exhibit trust, team work, and understanding as well as enhance mutual sharing."³ Pain must not be allowed to go unchecked to the extent that the weight, magnitude or intensity and reality of all the suffering explode into full blown evil, distress and injury.

Friends feel, cry and shed genuine tears, a sign of empathy for the suffering person. In Job it is not only a question of shedding tears, but prayers are offered. The lament type of prayer is direct as expressed in Job's word, "I cry to you and you do not answer me; I stand, and you merely look at me" (Job 30:20). The lament also borrows a leaf from prayers of supplication like, "Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O

³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al (eds), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 835.

LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today” (1 Kgs 8:28). It is quite likely that, “the shedding of tears does not imply that Job’s integrity is in doubt.”⁴ Job’s cry might be reminiscent of that of the Psalter, “I cry aloud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah” (Psalm3:4). Therefore friends worship tearfully!

The suffering can be so great (כִּי-גָרַל הַכְּאֵב נִאָּדָר) (Job 2:12-13) that immediate family members and close friends have to perform ritual actions of tearing clothes and putting dust on their heads. Most mourners from communities in the western part of Kenya smear their faces with grey clay or ashes, to invoke the spirits or challenge death; put on sack cloth or banana leaves to signify loss of property, a reminder that human beings are born without property and they die poor. Job advances this argument when he says, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). It might also signify surrender and readiness for departure to the spiritual world, as well as personal resurrection and immortality, or personal survival past the grave (death). Hence in the Luyhia community of Kenya traditional mourning is not complete without saying a lament to console the suffering person.

The Lament, among the predominantly western communities of Kenya the Luo, Abaluhya and the Abagusii is a solo musical performance, rich with tones of weighty meaningful words. The lament has two parts: the first highlights the good deeds done by the people or person undergoing the suffering and pain. The second inquires from God the wrongs done by the individual, friends or community to deserve this suffering and

⁴ J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1985), 60.

pain? The question whether suffering is valid or not leads Job to question the whereabouts of God during strife. The Psalter also does the same in the phrase, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Ps 22:1-3). This parallels what happens in Kenya particularly when wailing progresses to question existence and the relevance of the origin of human beings, demanding God’s protection, saying enough is enough or just empathizing with the suffering person.

Official mourning starts after the wailing, a sign that the wider community is standing in solidarity to express their grief. Though the mourners might not experience the same pain, they have to lower themselves to the same level and sit down with the suffering. Job’s friends demonstrated this when they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights (Job 2:13). A person is assigned to the sufferer to assist in making sure that they get food and medication lest health deteriorates. Sometimes the friends come up with a schedule to take turns and be available throughout. During this time what the suffering person says or utters is keenly listened to for it possibly could lead to the root of the suffering. Though this is often the case still the question, “Why the righteous suffer?” is never conclusively answered.

Should people then continue to suffer because they are pious? Well, no one should and the character of biblical Job is not an exception. Job, for one, does not come to terms with the fact that the righteous must suffer. Whether one is righteous or not it is hard for true friends to endure continued pain. They strive and use whatever is at their disposal to bring relief if not end the suffering. Even if it means causing some initial pain

in order to squeeze and remove the 'boil', they do not mind very much. In order to end such pain friends are called to wrestle and pin the affected person down so that they can squeeze the boil and when all is well there is laughter!

Peace talks can take the centre stage at crucial times to end strife. The major goal would be to alleviate suffering by initiating peace, truth, justice, reconciliation and healing. Kenyans have a saying that, "where there are elders nothing goes wrong." So the communities look to and consult elders for guidance not only during misunderstanding, but in times of drought, floods, and any calamity or suffering that befalls the community. Peace can be enhanced at a fast pace by listening to what is said by the suffering. Job's friends press for retribution or repentance.

The process toward the realization of peace may only continue on course after one party has exhibited remorse and the aggrieved party is ready to give reconciliation. This is quite problematic, for according to the case Job argues, the defendant is God, whose Omnipresence is put to the test. Job is asking, "Where are you, God, in this suffering?" It is easy to vindicate Job by using the saying, "the wearer of the shoe knows where it pinches," and agree with Job who knows that he is blameless. Yet, how challenging it is given the circumstances Job and his wife find themselves in, not to give up, and follow the advice, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). In Job it is quite different, for he is both the aggrieved and the wrong doer so he must repent! Suffering befalls humanity and it is the duty of humanity to work out solutions on ways to cope with suffering.

God intends peace to come from our piety. Such peace might not just be pegged on religious practice as a valid claim to necessitate one to be out of the periphery of

encountering the challenge of suffering. No one is upright enough to challenge the supremacy of the Creator as Job would want us to believe. The poet uses the words to question this, “Can mortals be righteous (צַדִּיק) before God? Can human beings be pure (טָהוֹר) before their Maker? Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error” (Job 4:17-18). Since humans are impure and prone to sin, then attaining holiness in a world that has many challenges and shortcomings is far fetched. How can we then maintain God’s standard of righteousness? The answer is repentance.

Companionship thrives on perseverance

Despite the fact that Job has a good standing in society, he does not paint a bright picture of his companions who he vehemently says, “are treacherous like a torrent-bed, like freshets that pass away, that run dark with ice, turbid with melting snow. In time of heat they disappear; when it is hot, they vanish from their place” (Job 6:15-17). That is exactly what happens in real circumstances, “though human beings are born to trouble (עַמָּל) or sparks flying upward they do not want to be drawn into other people’s problems or misery (אֵינָן)” (Job 5:6-7). In Kenya such companions are referred to as, “friends of lies” or simply liars. They are only there when things are good but flee during bad times saying, “everyone with their luggage.”

Job’s wife struggles with psychological stress a result of the suffering they are undergoing. Overwhelmed by strain she resorts to harsh speech and questions the validity of suffering, “do you still persist, continue to be strong in your integrity (בְּתַקְיָתָךְ)? Curse God, and die” (Job 2:9). Kenyan society would view this as fanning the already burning coal on one’s head or adding injury to injury! Such stress must be detected early and dealt with because in most instances chances are that the spouse who is not directly in pain can

be the first to succumb to the pain. Those whose hope has vanished may lean toward, “preference for sudden death than lingering pain from which no recovery seems possible.”⁵

Job’s continued submissiveness is astounding. A virtue that is rare in ordinary life, most would abandon such a position and may be heard commenting, “It is better I die than continue living seeing problems.” The normal response is, “Life is like that, there are ups and downs.” Persisting in integrity and doing things in the proper order looks fine, better still is when emergency measures are put in place to guard against calamity and provide the basics of life. Spouses have a responsibility to offer encouragement and assistance to one another especially during trying times. Intimacy instills courage and strength needed for coping with suffering. Hence, companions must assist each other by agreeing to carry each other’s “loads” when the going gets tough for one of them. I agree with Vanhoozer when he says that, “suffering clarifies and isolates the central issue of faith.”⁶ Therefore, suffering and pain must in the end solidify the relation between the spouses, as we face challenges in life and deal with such suffering collectively then we cultivate a sense of interdependence.

Perseverance appears in the words Job uses in answer to his wife, “Shall we receive the good (הַטִּיב) at the hand of God and not the bad (הַרָע)” (Job 2:10). In Kenya during the rainy season the highlands receive a lot of rainfall and the residents are very happy for it is planting season, yet in the low lands the inhabitants are alarmed with the impending floods. One group complains, the other is all praises. The first lesson a new

⁵ David J. A. Clines et al (eds), *Word Biblical Commentary 17, Job 1-20* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989), 51.

⁶ Vanhoozer et al (eds), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 886.

born baby is given in Kenya is to taste the bitter and the good. First it is given salt to taste that makes it cry with bitterness but later when the child is given honey there is smacking of the lips, a great change in response. This informs and prepares the child for the joys and happiness as well as the bitterness and sadness that would be encountered in life. Since suffering is a reality of life and there is no way we might evade it completely then when it comes one's way it calls for us to put into practice the dynamics of perseverance and humility.

Philosophy or tradition about loss

The friends of Job portray what society thinks about loss that, things do not just happen, there has to be a cause. In Kenya this is referred to as traditional postmortem in that everything emanates from a source or root. Loss through repeated deaths is construed as the result of sin before God. The innocent can suffer but they have to cry out in that, "Those who are ill look for the doctor." Job brings out this reality in the lament, "Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes" (Job 3:25-26). Vanhoozer says that, "Historically, Job in his human weakness spoke wrongly toward God, but was still more righteous than his friends."⁷ This is captured in the phrase, "for in all this misfortune Job uttered no sinful word" (Job 2:10). How about Job's curse when he said, "Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived.' Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it" (Job 3:2-4).

Reason or philosophy is not adequate to ward off suffering. We should not be content with giving instructions on how to strengthen, support and make firm the

⁷ Vanhoozer et al (eds), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 385.

suffering person, it is better to take practical action, to make correction and improvements, immediately in order to halt continued suffering from disaster. It is dangerous to embrace passivity when faced with suffering. Job, the poet, cautions about passivity in the phrase, “but now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed” (Job 4:5). Does reason and philosophy then give us the impetus to ascribe to, “Job the pious against Job the protester?” Whichever side one argues from the gist of the matter is entangling the riddle, “why do the innocent suffer?” and it still calls for debate.

Humanity is at pains to pin-point the origin of suffering of the innocent. The problem is compounded the more by the fact that, there is nothing one can do to prevent natural calamity. I am certain that it is out of this realization that, “Job desperately pleads for justice from God, he persistently believes that only God can resolve his crisis.”⁸ To Job, God is the living redeemer (יְהוָה הַיּוֹשֵׁעַ) (Job 19:25). God is fully relied upon during suffering because He can bring suffering to an end. In Kenya, most people, be they non-believers or believers, look to the Creator to offer rescue during times of suffering. The popular saying at such times is that, “we have left the situation into the hands of the Creator to rescue us.”

Taking responsibility for our actions precedes the caution that, “You reap what you sow.” Eliphaz uses this argument to introduce the issue of sin. He argues that Job is trying to hinder piety by not fearing or worshipping God. Though he raises questions about who has ever perished for being innocent yet he asserts that, “those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same” (Job 4:8). At times this might seem inappropriate

⁸ Vanhoozer et al (eds), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 386.

given that, “Act and consequence do not necessarily correspond.”⁹ All the same individuals who are responsible for trouble in society must be held accountable for their actions. The theme Eliphaz chooses to use is quite relevant to Kenyans who link loss with sin. It is not strange to hear people asking in hushed voices about what someone has done to merit suffering. Society anticipates repentance, resignation, or owning up to one’s mistakes. Job might agree with those who want to say, “It is none of your business,” in the words he questions God,

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 spittle? (Job 7:17-19).

Repentance or remorse is better than continuing to contend for righteousness. It is evident that Job is requested by his friends to seek the Almighty and make supplication because of the major underlying factor coined in the words, “God will not reject a blameless person (יָמֵס־תָּמִים לֹא יִלְוֶה) nor take the hand of evildoers” (Job 8:20). God is ready to and does offer mercy freely to those who are blameless. To me this validates the position of Lament in liturgy. Therefore Job must not be punished for saying a lament in which he expresses and directs his anger to God. Yes, Job is, “a blameless person” here. In Kenya the tone and words in a lament tend to be panoramic. The godly indulge in the religious exercise of saying laments. The fact that questions are directed at God does not imply having a quarrel with God, instead the Supreme is accorded due respect and honor. Most Kenyan traditional norms discourage the young from arguing with their elders in public, but they can ask questions with intent of getting information, not just for the sake of argument. Just so, it would be unfathomable to pick a quarrel with the Creator before

⁹ Clines et al (eds), *Word Biblical Commentary 17, Job 1-20*, 125.

an audience the way Job does. Wrong doers are advised to, “Ask for forgiveness and all will be well.” Hence, in order to restore severed relationship with the elders, one needs to show remorse.

Punishment is a corrective measure for sin. It is the expectation from society that Job’s guilt or iniquity deserves punishment. Zophar does not agree with Job’s claim to pure conduct in God’s sight. Otherwise, Job would not be undergoing the pain and suffering. So in a harsh tone, he pointedly tells Job, “God exacts of you less than your guilt” (Job 11:6b). The argument advanced by Zophar is very convincing in that God, knows those who are worthless, and when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it? This is like erasing any cause for surprise when the wicked receive just retribution. Since, “The exulting of the wicked is short and the joy of the godless is but for a moment ” (Job 20:5). Though this might be the case it should be realized that not all who suffer are wrongdoers.

Job knows he has not sinned, but only a target for suffering. His suffering is clearly spelt when he says, “My flesh is clothed or covered (לִבְשׁ) with worms and dirt, my skin hardens then breaks out again” (Job 7:5). No doubt given the magnitude of the suffering, one would be scared and terrified to death, but why the suffering in the first place? A better question would be, what do we do with inexplicable pain? One of the options apart from putting other physical needs into place is prayer. The narrator gives this description in the words, “then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and bowed down (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה)” (Job 1:20). The same is for Kenyans, the response to calamity is to offer prayers. If it were death, the bereaved would put on special clothes to show that they are mourning. The shaving of the hair signifies loss as well as a new

beginning in life. Falling onto the ground and applying ash to the whole body is very common. Ash and dust are seen as the material that was used in the creation of humanity. The fact that Job still maintains that he is innocent and sees no need for repentance or supplication leaves open the question, Why do the innocent suffer?

CHAPTER 3

THE EXTERNAL FORCE AGAINST SUFFERING

In this chapter I will talk about the need for external assistance as a welcome notion. Those who find themselves in a position of providing assistance must have good intentions, while those experiencing suffering must show appreciation. The experience of Job encourages readers to look beyond our parameters for rescue and assistance in times of need. It is expected and a common occurrence for one to rely on intervention from external help in situations where we might not be able to find solutions. The most sensible action to take when faced with situations that are beyond one's comprehension is to accept and acknowledge the relevancy of help from an external force. In Kenya, people will seek assistance from their neighbor, close relatives and friends. It is hard to seek solutions on one's own as highlighted by the saying, "to kill lice you need two thumb nails," which simply means two heads are better than one. The community is bound to reprimand those who are not keen on seeking external assistance by quipping, "Don't you have people," or getting assurance from the saying, "Do not weep we are here." You cannot continue suffering as if you live alone while you are a member of a community. Therefore, the wider society must take the challenge of offering assistance to those who are suffering and in need.

Guidance for receiving external assistance can be availed to the suffering in various forms which include mediators, economic providers and social reconstruction agencies like Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), self help groups, community

based , and faith based organizations. When calamity strikes, it is not surprising for the affected persons to end up refugees or internally displaced. The issue of a sense of demeaning for those faced with calamity choosing to seek outside help does not arise, the central aim is to offer the needed help on humanitarian grounds. The best is to arrest the situation then ask questions later. The provisions to the affected persons are mainly the basics for survival: housing or shelter, food, clothing, medication and security. This list looks fine, but there is more to suffering than just the provision of social amenities. The psychological and spiritual aspect has to be addressed; the “prescription,” is the lament. Though one might be content with the phrase, “surely God is great, and we do not know him; the number of his years is unsearchable” (Job 36:26), the truth is the sufferer must be given the opportunity to say their lament to the Creator. It is at such times of suffering composers, arrangers, writers, and performers of songs use their talent and skill to address the plight of society in a way that soothes the mind and soul.

In Kenya, when a house catches fire the first persons to react to the distress call are the immediate neighbors. They rush to assist in extinguishing the flames from the burning house. Faced with danger, it is common to hear people yelling as they pass on instructions. Job also faced danger with, wails and yells, not at other people, but at God. Job, in his howls, appears to be impatient and therefore when the Almighty God seems not to answer, Job says, “Even when I cry out, 'Violence!' (רָמַסְ) I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths. He has stripped my glory from me, and taken the crown (עֲטֹרֶת) from my head” (Job 19:7-9). Though one may want to dismiss Job’s cry as an expression of self centeredness and aggrandizement, his bitterness is justified because his

life is in danger. The problem then is why one would send out a distress call only to be ignored by those within hearing to the extent that there is no immediate rescue given? Yes, Job needs to be given an answer. The response to the wailing is fast and within no time people will be gathered ready to offer assistance. It is not just a question of availing oneself, but giving either provision or advice. This brings to validity the saying, “A drowning person grasps tightly at water.” How much more would such a person clutch at a piece of wood or benefit from external assistance? Those in need take the little that is offered without complaint.

Sharing experiences comes in handy as a way to put anguish in place while reflecting on reasons for suffering. Interpreting life stories, whether good or bad, is the starting point to probe and interpret relevant solutions to suffering. Job seems to struggle with this reality when he asks, “But where can wisdom be found?” (Job 28:12). I concur with Tewoldemedhin Habtu’s informative ideas about wisdom in that,

We scan the earth, the sea and the heavens but cannot find wisdom. Nor can we buy it with all the gems we possess (Job 28:13-19). The query is repeated in (Job 28:20). Though the absence of wisdom in the created universe is underscored, the end of the human search for wisdom is intimated in the words, “God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells”(Job 28: 23). And then God articulates the essence of wisdom: And he said to man, the fear of the Lord is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding (Job 28:28).¹

The divine speeches contain the wisdom Job is seeking.

The divine speeches and Salvation

The divine speeches give us the opportunity to glimpse God’s wisdom, strength, and understanding. Interestingly these three talents (wisdom, strength, and understanding)

¹ Tewoldemedhin Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006), 569.

are dependable during rescue missions. In these speeches, we, the readers of Job, recognize the love and concern the Creator has for all creation. Surprisingly Yahweh appearing before Job in a whirlwind (הַסְעָרָה) is a pointer to the urgency of solving the situation of suffering Job, as well as some proof of how successful the distress call (קוֹלִי וְשׁוֹעֲתִי) sounded by Job was, to the extent that God took heed, promptly rushed to the scene, and as one would rightly expect, redeemed the suffering Job. In contrast, God does not answer Job's questions, nevertheless the reader is left more informed about what the book of Job questions, fairness and justice. I argue that in the divine speeches, God requires of humanity action and response. Such a concern develops beyond what Job demands of God, a mere presence, and from close friends or community, just visits or respect. Hence the fitting response to suffering is to provide what is relevant for the situation. Proper advice given at a crucial moment can make a huge contribution to counter and reduce pain.

Yahweh speaks from the whirlwind or storm (Job 38:2-41:34) and portrays the necessity of power as a means for countering suffering. He arrives on the scene with full force and authority to instill confidence and the desired change. What God says is of utmost importance, for from His speech one is bound to understand what God is up to. A close scrutiny of the first speech (Job 38:1-40:2) leads the reader to know the requirement for having fellowship and dialogue with God is, "a heart of wisdom and an understanding mind" (Job 38:36). Kenyan communities acknowledge that wisdom comes from the inner heart (בְּטָהוּרָת) and understanding from the stable mind. Though this is the case, still solutions to difficult issues on existence are left for God the Creator to tackle.

The presence of the whirlwind is unmistakable, for it is devastatingly powerful, a quality ascribed to God. This is acknowledged by Edwin M. Good for he says, “storms were portents of divine presence in Israel.”² His biblical reference is from the phrase, “Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry” (Ps 18:7).

Is God’s anger the whirlwind which makes the earth tremble and shake? The Abaluhya people of Kenya call the whirlwind, “Ikihuzuzu” meaning, “that which sweeps and carries away everything found in its path.” So when people see the “Ikihuzuzu” gaining momentum, they literally take to their heels. I see a parallelism with what Good says of the whirlwind, “it certainly lends an awesome atmosphere of darkness and noise to accompany God’s cosmic outpouring.”³ One might not be far from the truth of the author of the book of Job who embarks on showing a deep understanding of God’s creation, in a world of complications. The poet uses this premise of truth to ask whether Job can control the world. Since the powerful God does succeed in overpowering both Behemoth and Leviathan who are deemed to represent chaotic evil power, then God is omnipotent and therefore reliable and dependable.

Crises have a positive tinge in that they offer us an opportunity to set aside our differences for a while and work together to counteract the danger posed by suffering. If the magnitude of the suffering surpasses the combined efforts from within, then external assistance must be sought. That is why many times in Kenya during natural calamity community leaders call for nation-wide prayers. In instances of loss from death, the

² Edwin M. Good, “Job” in James L. Mays et al (eds), *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 430.

³ *Ibid.*, 430.

community attends and takes responsibility for most activities in the home of the bereaved family until the mourning period ends. People console and empathize with the suffering by being present even though they cannot feel the pain felt by the individual. All is not quiet even in times of sorrow, questions are directed to God the way Job did. The questioning takes different phrasing such as, “God, why me? Why at this time? Why should I suffer?” Through such questioning the person experiencing suffering seeks meaning in suffering. Some communities compose and sing relevant and meaningful mourning dirges questioning God to give meaning to the loss that has befallen the mourner. By contrast, instead of God providing answers to the questions asked by Job he asks Job a few questions.

Yahweh’s questions make one wonder whether any meaningful and final help can come from Job’s friends. These questions push one to realize how hard it can be to get answers to the intricate issue of suffering. God asks questions about the animals and their qualities, whether Job can control the animal or give it its prey. Yahweh then poses the great question, “Will an accuser of Shaddai yield or God’s arbiter answer it?” (Job 40:2). The answer is an emphatic, No! Though Job’s initial answer, “Oh I am small, what could I reply to you,” (Job 40:3-5), may suggest acquiescence and resignation to the inevitable. He does not embrace acceptance of being in the wrong, for challenging God to a court case. Job was asking the Judge questions, and going further to demand prompt answers! Yahweh the supreme Judge gives us a just ruling to the extent that we can now comprehend what justice entails and how it must be viewed, a step toward reconciliation with God and fellow humans. Hence, I find the divine speeches’ concern for innocence

and justice well said but the question still remains how these teachings impact our relationship with the Creator.

Rhetorical questions are a means used by God to give counsel with words of knowledge. The questions place Job on the spot to the extent that his status, place, and power with respect to creation are scrutinized. Yes, God speaks directly to Job but in his own time and way. It is hard to set conditions for God who according to Habtu, “speaks on his own terms, not in the courtroom terms Job has been demanding, and he is never on the defensive. Job had given a challenge while swearing his oath of innocence (Job 31: 35-37).”⁴ But now God’s response negates the validity of Job’s complaint that, “God has totally ignored his need.”⁵ Hence the questions, “Who are you? Where were you? Are you able?” agree with the Psalmist who poses, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Ps 8:4). Job’s comment, “creation conforms to no moral pattern,”⁶ would draw wrath from the Creator who gives us insight about the diversity of qualities within creation. True, Job is innocent, yet he displays unsurpassable magnitude of ignorance when he purports God’s creation is meaningless.

An understanding mind is bound to cultivate the sense of an orderly run of events. One who is vested with the quality of portraying high understanding of situations can help us carry out our design, plan, intention, scheme or purpose in, “the gratuitousness of creative love.”⁷ The book of Job encourages us in the words, “This

⁴ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 599.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 599.

⁶ Leo Perdue & W. Clark Gilpin, (eds), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1992), 45.

⁷ Gutierrez, *On Job: God- Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, 69.

design must not be clouded in darkness by anyone” (Job 38:2). God does not entertain spoilers or people who are bent to disrupt things just for the sake of doing so. We should understand the question, “Where were you (אֵינִי הָיִיתִי) when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:4) as a pointer to show that, God purposed the creation of the earth and the sea through His own volition, therefore He cannot be answerable to anyone, let alone Job. This is the God who restores order to the chaotic sea as well as the cosmic world. The wild creatures though, “untamed by human intervention,”⁸ are worthwhile, meaningful and evoke exuberant celebration. God controls the dawn and dusk. Discernment and comprehension of creation and its functions is alien to humanity. From Job we learn that, “God plans, wills, and puts into effect all that happens in history, down to the least detail,”⁹ I envision some parallelism with what most communities in Kenya affirm, “calamity should be left for God to solve.” The reason Tewoldemedhin gives is that, “God is purposeful in his creation, pervasive in his control and personal in his care.”¹⁰

To address the issues of truth, justice and reconciliation, I will use the second speech (Job 40:6- 41:34) and take the argument beyond the mere duality of guilt and innocence, wickedness and morality or right and wrong. The second part of the speech is addressing moral justice which must include truth and reconciliation. The God of truth and justice inquires of Job, “Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?” (Job 40:8). Edwin M. Good puts it clearer; can Job annul

⁸ Gutierrez, *On Job: God- Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, 228.

⁹ Perdue & Gilpin, *The Voice from the Whirlwind*, 162.

¹⁰ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 600.

God's order by treating him as guilty to prove Job's innocence? The issue of suffering must not be trivialized whereby, if Job is right, then God is wrong and vice versa. Order translates to moral justice and cosmic structure. I concur with Edwin Good, who says that,

The world does not spin on the axes of guilt and innocence, and ever since Eliphaz raised the question of justice back in 4:7, the conversation was deflected, at least in Yahweh's judgment...suffering is not a sign of guilt and the dialogue between Job and the friends went off on a wrong tangent.¹¹

There is righteousness and not bias from God who challenges Job to try and, "Look upon the proud and humble them!...Crush the wicked where they stand ! Hide them in the dust together!" (Job 40:11-13). If Job succeeds then Yahweh is ready to praise him for the victory. What an impossible task! The consolation comes in the words about the God of the covenant who Gutierrez says, "is just and requires justice."¹² It is true that Behemoth and Leviathan are imaginary monsters, creatures of myth and fantasy. Good says, "Leviathan is too powerful and beyond any human control while Behemoth is fierce and stays where all wild animals play."¹³ Though this might be the case, God is omnipotent even more than the powers of both Behemoth and Leviathan who are themselves chaotic and evil. God can overcome chaos and all evil.

Salvation allows those suffering to recover completely. In Job it is initiated by God the Creator, "Yahweh appears to Job as he did to heroic figures like Noah and Abraham."¹⁴ The challenge is this: If God is guilty, then let Job deal with human

¹¹ Good "Job" in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, 430.

¹² Gutierrez, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, 72.

¹³ Good, "Job" *Harper's Bible Commentary*, 431.

¹⁴ Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1985), 527.

problems of justice and immorality in the human world (Job 40:9-14). God must not be seen as avenger, nor tyrant, but one who assists in recovery. Yahweh invites Job to rule by presenting a progression : first the realm of humans (Job 40:9-14), then the realm of natural power beyond human force, Behemoth (Job 40:15-24) and finally the realm of supernatural, mythic power above creation, Leviathan (Job 41:1-34).¹⁵ Good argues that, “If Job wants to control the deity by the power of his moral innocence, he must contend with forces that, though less than the deity, are more than Job can handle.”¹⁶ In Kenya most people anticipate victory to be necessitated by God in order to cope during hard times or situations. For Job the freedom from suffering comes from God. The provider of confidence assists one to cope and come out of suffering within a short period. Hence, God is able to change any bad situation into the best life.

God of Providence

Providing for those in suffering and pain is a good gesture. The author of Job shows what God does to ascertain continuous and successful procreation. God preserves, protects, provides and cares for all animals at their various points of need. When and how the animals give birth and who delivers them of their young is a mystery for, “Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open; they go forth, and do not return to them” (Job 39: 4). Wild animals and birds attain independence quickly and early in life. This is a great feat and a challenge to human beings, who take quite some time, about one year, to stand and support self then walk with minimal support. God provides to all His creation in its vulnerable stages that otherwise can spell hopelessness and doom.

¹⁵ Good, “Job” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 431.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 431.

Free and fair distribution of resources to the needy is made possible when we shut out restrictions or bias that more often jeopardize equal distribution of God's blessings. I find some resonance in this phrase, "Divine providence knows no bounds."¹⁷ We can compare the rainfall God avails to both human and the rest of creation as a show of God's, "generosity and life-giving care."¹⁸ In Kenya, rain often falls in the city and people are heard complaining that it should instead fall in the rural areas where farming is the major economic activity. In the virtually desert climate of the North Eastern province, lives are claimed every other year during heavy floods and prolonged spells of drought. Common and chronic tropical diseases like malaria, the killer, take its toll on lives. Faced with such calamities, there are more calls for external help. Such external assistance is God-sent providence, and so one must be ready to accept to cope or adapt to the suffering that results from drought, famine, floods, disease, and human-initiated suffering.

Questions are an effective way of teaching, because they force the learner to think for themselves.¹⁹ I concur with Tewoldemedhin's comment,

From the divine speeches Job offers us two modes of responses (Job 40: 3-5; 42: 1-6). Job's first response, 'See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further' (Job 40:4-5), unlike the second, 'therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes' (Job 42: 6), does not include the word 'repent'.²⁰

¹⁷ James L. Crenshaw et al (ed), *Theodicy in The Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 20.

¹⁸ J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Louisville, Kentucky : John Knox Press, 1985), 238.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 600.

²⁰ Habtu, "Job" in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 600.

Then it augurs well that the divine speeches open a new perspective that offers us as well as, “Job the possibility for transformed self understanding.”²¹ So when Job says, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42: 2), it is an assurance that he is alluding to the omnipotent and omniscient God. Hence, Job quotes from, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2) Then says, “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). Good calls this an odd sentence in which, “Job admits having spoken beyond his competence.”²²

Now Job is able to hear in the present, no longer in the distant past, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). The Kenyan saying, “Today is today! The one who says tomorrow is a liar,” is applicable and relevant here. This might compare with one arguing that, “Today is tomorrow’s yesterday.” We the readers of Job are provided with the spectrum of the world’s totality comprising all creation. Just as Job is given a wider scope of the marvels of creation, so are we. The suffering is helped to make the step from the distance of, “a purely anthropocentric view of creation,”²³ and instead investigate the present environment. This is sure to jolt us to reality and build confidence.

Making good and relevant choices can be weighty when evil or suffering befalls. One must not, as Gutierrez says, “succumb to discouragement and disillusionment but it

²¹ Janzen, *Job*, 230.

²² Good, “Job” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 431.

²³ Gutierrez, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, 74.

were better to have a deeper loyalty and vocational endurance.”²⁴ Job’s words in the phrase, “therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6), negate the machinery and concept of guilt and innocence as the central issue of human life. Therefore, Eliphaz appears to have moved the debate off the centre line when he introduced the notion of retribution, categorizing the world by guilt and innocence. Job was so sure of his moral purity that the slur seemingly cast by the friend’s retribution seduced him into seeking a way out. I concur with what Gutierrez says, “the friends urged Job to repent. And so Job does, but contrary to what they anticipated, he repents of repentance.”²⁵

Hope is something valuable that one should cling to at all times, more so in times of suffering. Somehow one must have hope in life, even when the odds indicate otherwise. It is clear that not only has Job seen God, he has also seen himself, to the extent that he is now ready to despise self and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:6). His experience is similar to that of Isaiah who said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:5). Tewoldemedhin encourages us to borrow a leaf from “Job’s experience of fellowship with God to understand who we are.”²⁶

True, God’s providence fuels and sustains the debate that continues to generate interpretative responses as diverse and irreconcilable as the disputes between Job and his friends. In asserting his integrity, Job has been accusing God of acting unjustly. Yet, from

²⁴ Gutierrez, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, 242.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 431.

²⁶ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 602.

the poet and his prose we are challenged to cherish, uphold and provide good governance, equitable distribution and allocations of resources so that we can live better in a dynamic world. From the divine speeches one can decipher through understanding that, “God’s goodness lies beyond justice....the categories of guilt and punishment, true and terrible though they are, can only view human suffering as a consequence of sin, not as an occasion of grace.”²⁷ In the end, Job’s deep contrition is an informative way to tell us that our response needs to despise the sin of arrogant talk against God.

²⁷ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 601.

CHAPTER 4

COPING WITH SUFFERING

In this chapter I will consider lessons we as readers learn from Job, then show their relevance as a guide that can lead us to cope with suffering after the experience of loss,

The challenge for God to show up is the underlying factor in Job's lament; as a result Job appears to be questioning the validity of the omnipresence of God. If God were human then He would see and feel the magnitude of the suffering. It is the overwhelming impression made on Job by the vision of God that leaves him at the end of the poem contrite and subdued.¹

Job portrays what happens when we are stressed or weighed down with the pain of suffering. It is common to vent our anger on someone else. A trace of blame-shifting can be detected in comments like, "Had you been here I would not be undergoing this kind of pain."

Job's narrative avoids the trap of piling blame on others and moves to a more insightful plane. This progression starts from what Job demands, the mere presence of God, and moves on to prove that the impact of the presence of the Almighty is redemptive. I concur with Fyall when he refers to God as, "the redeemer for whom Job had longed."² This turn of events is good news to the readers of Job for in the end God the Creator does not bring suffering nor has He any intention to sustain suffering. Instead

¹ A S. Peake, "Job: the Problem of the book" in James L. Crenshaw et al (eds), *Theodicy in The Old Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 106.

² Robert S. Fyall, *Now my eyes have seen you: Images of creation and evil in the book of Job* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 33.

God ends the suffering Job is undergoing. Peake notes that, “God appears but does not explain to Job why he suffers.”³ Sometimes when the person we purport to challenge appears we sure become nervous. For Job, like with everyone else, blame-shifting does not take him far; instead, as Fyall says, “Yahweh charges Job with ignorance.”⁴ I like Job, for he does what is expected of him, he repents of his ignorance. Job might have realized that, “Ignorance has no defense.” The simple task of showing remorse can lead us like Job to experience, “a restored relationship with God” (Job 42:1-6).⁵ The suffering might be inevitable, but it should not be prolonged or go on unchecked.

In Kenya, the saying, “Spilt milk cannot be drawn,” is used to comfort those who are weighed down by hardships that are not their making. It has happened! Yes, but we have to gather ourselves up and get going. It is also used to acknowledge or cement the understanding that things are ‘finite’ and once they are gone it is hard to reverse the action. In Kenya the Luhyia community uses a big clay pot called, “Isiong’o” to go and draw water from the water spring. The pot full of water is placed on the head and carried back home, but just before entering the house when lowering the pot from the head to support the pot by resting it on a knee; the pot sometimes drops on the floor and shatters! The reality is that water will still have to be drawn. The person has to go back and fetch more water. Job encourages us, though the pot might seem shattered, to get up, move on and stay focused. The faster one accepts the situation the better for recovery to start and the desired growth in the right direction.

³ Peake, “Job: the Problem of the book” in James L. Crenshaw et al (eds), *Theodicy in The Old Testament*, 105.

⁴ Fyall, *Now my eyes have seen you: Images of creation and evil in the book of Job*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

Suffering is part of life and cannot be waved off. The suffering and pain of one person is sure to affect the friends, community and the wider society. In most Kenyan communities when one person is not seen or heard of for some reasonable time, people will start asking the whereabouts of the person. People are concerned for each other. They are concerned with peace and the well being of every one in the village. In case the person who has not been seen for some time shows up and it is realized that he/she was sick, it is not surprising to overhear people commenting to the person that suffering is part of life, or “Take heart, life is like that.” The person accepts these words of comfort by replying, “I feel comforted and I am now relaxed.” This helps one to come out of the otherwise low spirits as soon as possible. The question is, who should we look to when the situation seems hopeless and the future appears bleak?

Submission to God and Spiritual growth

We should look to the Creator when the situation seems hopeless and the future appears bleak. We, the readers, know that Job does not need to repent, but his repentance portrays his submission. Hartley acknowledges that Job, “contritely confessing that he has spoken beyond his knowledge (42:2-3) makes Job submit to the God who has appeared to him (42:4-6).” I concur with Hartley when he says, “Job’s concession means that Job believes that everything occurring on earth takes place within the framework of the divine wisdom.”⁶ This is the beginning of spiritual growth.

God can do all things and what He intends no human can prevent. When this fact dawns on one, then it is not only advisable but a must to put trust in God whether we

⁶ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988), 535.

understand the reason for God's action or not. Peake puts it clearly when he says, "Job, ignorant, yet trustful, is a model and a help to all who are confronted by the insoluble mystery of their own or the world's pain."⁷ After the realization that God has good plans or, "things too wonderful," one then finds it easy and meaningful to despise self and be repentant. Repentance as a turning point enables the person to move on in the right direction and experience a better spiritual relationship with God.

Accepting one's mistake is a big step toward healing. It is also crucial and instrumental in that it helps one embark on the path to cope with suffering. Job arrives at this encouraging stage when he concludes, "therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3b). This phrase echoes what goes on in Kenya where it is not rare to hear people comment, "Oh! I did not know, so it is supposed to be this way." I concur with Peake who says, "God's wisdom and omnipotence no longer crush but uphold and uplift Job."⁸ Job then shows us the initial step to use in order to follow the right and beneficial path of bearing hard times. Patience and persistence focused in the right direction come to fruition and one arrives at reconciliation. Most people, who are affected or infected with HIV/AIDS, continue leading active lives and attend to most of their day-to-day activities. They find strength and confidence through participating in societal activities.

Choosing to take action and correcting the wrong thinking or impression is a stride in the right direction. I gather that from Job's new reaction to God there is a positive shift in respect to the suffering of the innocent. Job says, "I had heard of you by

⁷ Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 535.

⁸ Peake, "Job: the Problem of the book" in James L. Crenshaw et al (eds), *Theodicy in The Old Testament*, 107.

the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6). Wolfers comments that, “this was Job’s devoutest wish, expressed in the parallel verses, ‘for I know that my Redeemer lives’ (19:25a), and ‘then in my flesh I shall see God’ (19:26b). These verses show that Job is perishing within his bosom, ‘my heart faints within me’ (19:27c).”⁹ I find this relates to what the psalmist writes, “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God (מִקְדָּשׁ־אֱלֹהִים); then I perceived (אֲבִינָהּ) their end” (Ps 73:16-17). Here is presented to us the readers a new Job no longer bent on challenging God. I see the relevancy of what Gutierrez says, “there has been a transformation in Job.”¹⁰ Job is brought to the understanding that God neither initiates nor allows the innocent to continue suffering. Tewoldemedhin puts it clearly and goes a notch higher when he says, “it is clear that not only has Job seen God, he has also seen himself.”¹¹ To make the intended and positive corrections, we have to be inward looking, searching the mind!

Job starts us from the physical realm of suffering with the categories of skin and bones as attested to in the verses, “my bones cling to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth. Have pity on me (רַחֲמֵנִי), have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me” (Job 19:20-21). Then he laments,

And now my soul is poured out within me; days of affliction have taken hold of me. The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest. With

⁹ David Wolfers, *Deep things out of darkness: The book of Job, essays and a new English translation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1995), 460.

¹⁰ Gutierrez, *On Job: God - Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, 28.

¹¹ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 602.

violence he seizes my garment; he grasps me by the collar of my tunic. He has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes (Job 30:16-19).

The suffering Job asks his friends to have pity on him because, ‘the hand of God has touched him’. This makes me envision, the strong hand of God bruising Job has some semblance to the way, “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled (אִבַּק) with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him” (Gen 32:24-25). So we may settle for the assumption that the Lord did touch Job just the way the man in the Genesis narrative struck Jacob? No doubt then suffering most often makes the individual lose self esteem to the extent that some demand to be accorded pity. I concur with Wolfers when he says that Job is portraying, “spiritual distress.”¹²

Discernment only comes after knowledge is synthesized. Job initially seems not to realize this fact when he decides to utter words of challenge to God. The words he uses to say the lament turn out to be of great weight and significance in real life, for instance, when Job says that he is all skin and bone (Job 19:20). At a casual glance, this might easily be seen as symptoms or results of disease. This type of illness Wolfers says, “is attributed not to disease, but to anguish which makes the speaker forget to eat.”¹³ The turning point comes when Job is availed the opportunity of discernment, his thoughts are challenged and stretched. He then drops his stance of blaming God as the one instituting suffering. Putting blame on others without tangible proof must not be encouraged, instead

¹² Wolfers, *Deep things out of darkness: The Book of Job, essays and a new English translation*, 128.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 127.

the suffering can cope with their situation through patience and in faithful appreciation that God can and does intervene in times of great need.

Spiritual growth comes, so to speak, when God breathes His breath once again into the life of his creation and we start living and relating better with God and fellow humanity. In Kenya covering oneself in dust and ashes or rolling oneself in dust, ashes or on the ground or just sitting down shows that one is beaten and has reached the end of defending oneself. The situation then calls for intervention from God. Getting off the ground is a beginning, this is clearly attested to by the practice of shaving all the hair from the head of the bereaved, washing and putting on new or clean clothes. These are physical signs but in reality what is geared at is the inner being. Hence, in order for one to experience spiritual growth, first there is the need for submission to God then moving back into living life.

Relying and turning to the Creator in worship

Encounter with the Creator brings about change that completely wipes out doubt. The action of repenting in “dust and ashes” depicts the seriousness. It is a reminder that human beings were formed from dust and so will return to the ground. It is through this realization that humans can know and remember to make use of prayer to fellowship and relate with the Creator. I agree with Tewoldemedhin who says that Job’s experience is similar to that of Isaiah in the temple when one of the seraphim, ‘called to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isa 6:3). Picking from the experience Job goes through, suffice it to say that, “true worship avails

us the chance to meet with God, as a result we come to understand who we are in the presence of the Creator.”¹⁴

Prayer is powerful and a strength to those who are spiritually weak. It is the only tool we can make use of anytime to ask God for guidance and providence. The book of Job ends fittingly with a prose epilogue (Job 42:7-17) where Job intercedes for his friends and is restored to even greater prosperity than he had enjoyed earlier. I agree with Fyall who says that, “Yahweh finally has the onus of pronouncing the verdict” (Job 42:7).¹⁵ Job’s friends are advised to go and give Job the animals for the burnt offering so that Job can offer these on their behalf. Apart from the offering God requires supplication prayers to be said in order to avert impending suffering for the friends.

Prayer then is used to ward off danger as is implied in the verse, “my servant Job shall pray (יִתְפַלֵּל) for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly” (Job 42:8b). The reason for the prayers of supplication is clear: that Job’s friends had not spoken of God what is right as Job had done. The author is bringing the case to a conclusion. Job is vindicated, and his prayer of supplication is accepted (Job 42:8-10). In Kenya for fellowship to be restored between differing parties, some animal has to be slaughtered then people partake of the meat together as a sign of reconciliation. During the ceremony prayers are said binding or reuniting the two parties. Prayers are called for and worship performed during persisting drought or floods.

God uses those who acknowledge his power and turn from discouragement to start anew. People who have undergone challenges in life and are ready to be of use to

¹⁴ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 602.

¹⁵ Fyall, *Now my eyes have seen you: Images of creation and evil in the book of Job*, 34.

society are the best at offering courage and hope to those undergoing similar challenges. One might find it hard to pray for oneself when there is the feeling of a heavy heart, So we can request those who participate in worship to pray for us in supplication. That is why Job's prayer was accepted when everything was followed in detail.

Worship does not thrive on defiance, but thrives when one surrenders and seeks reconciliation with God. Job knows that God possesses superior power, that is why when God appears he quickly confesses his ignorance of the hidden wisdom. Having knowledge of who God is allows us to face reality and the seriousness of suffering, and thereby accept advice which helps us respond positively toward what God demands. Wolfers is supportive of this argument when he says, "Job might not have just agreed to repent but retracted and accepted to be comforted."¹⁶ Given the fact that Job is availed the chance to speak last or have the last word indicates how favored he is. This augurs well with what Newsom says, "commitment to the primacy of dialogue appears to be affirmed by the fact that it is Job who must have the last word,"¹⁷ in respect to his friends. But the one who actually has the last word in respect to all humanity is the Creator God.

I concur with Wolfers who says that, "Job has succeeded in penetrating to the truth about the moral conduct of the world."¹⁸ He is one who has a new identity like Jacob and has "striven with God and with humans, and has prevailed" (Gen 32:28).

¹⁶ Wolfers, *Deep things out of darkness: The Book of Job, essays and a new English translation*, 461.

¹⁷ Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A contest of moral imaginations* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 28.

¹⁸ Wolfers, *Deep things out of darkness: The Book of Job, essays and a new English translation*, 462.

Therefore, the biblical character of Job is a model that leads us to agree with Fyall who writes,

The words used of Job underline his standing in the eyes of God and the heavenly court. He is 'blameless' (תָּמֵן), a word used of clean animals offered for sacrifice (e.g. Lev. 22:18-20), a word with ominous nuances in light of what follows. The word is also used of the Torah (Ps. 19:8) and of Noah in Genesis 6:19. Job is also 'upright' (יָשָׁר), a word used of God himself (Deut. 32:4). It is also used of the reforming Kings Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Kgs 18:3 and 22:2). The word implies integrity and faithfulness to God and his Word.¹⁹

The book of Job exhibits not only the profound richness of a lament but proves its significance as a prayer of intercession, the way Abraham and Jeremiah interceded in prayers for the people. The words of Job are echoed in the words of the Psalter, "Rise up, O Judge of the earth" (Ps 94:2). Much of the suffering that is rampant in our world can be contained or lived with by borrowing a leaf from the character of Job who directs his submission and worship to the Almighty. Job's piety is put to the test and he counters this by offering a prayer of lament. At times, one's faith is sure to be tested, and society requires and expects us to make a decision: either to continue in faith, or give room for the demands of the situation we might find ourselves in. Job's position is clear, whatever comes and whatever situation befalls the believer, one must beware lest they wavers in faith.

Seeking the Creator during pain and suffering is a sure sign of the first steps to understanding what role God can take in restoring life. God has to be relied upon, for He is able to intervene in situations that are beyond human comprehension. This does not imply we take a back seat, but be actively involved in asking God questions. The richness of the laments can be put to use by incorporating laments into our various forms of

¹⁹ Fyall, *Now my eyes have seen you: Images of creation and evil in the book of Job*, 35.

liturgies. Laments must be directed at the Creator, knowing that He hears and takes action. To Moses God answered, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them” (Ex 3:7-8a). The Psalter also reminds and assures us about the significance of the lament, “I lift up my eyes to the hills...from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 121:1-2). Similarly,

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple (Ps 27:3-4).

The book of Job upholds the teaching in this Psalm on confidence and courage and therefore, prepares the reader to face the challenge of suffering.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to look at the problem of theodicy, “Why do the righteous suffer?” then suggest some ways on, “How we can cope with suffering?” I maintain that God who is powerful and good must be relied upon to end suffering by restoring us to life. After revealing the experiences of Job and parallels in Kenya, I find it poignant now to look at suggestions of how we respond to loss. In this chapter, I will highlight the experience of Job, a person commended and approved by society for his good deeds, as is evidenced in the phrase, ‘When the ear heard, it commended me, and when the eye saw, it approved; because I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper’ (Job 29:11-12). Job can teach us when he decides to rely upon the omnipotent and omniscient.

In turning to God in prayer, we seek strength and courage to face loss. Right from the beginning, the author of Job leaves no doubt that the character of Job knew exactly what to do when faced with consistent loss. To an ordinary person this would be a hopeless situation that would leave one dumbfounded, but this is not the case with Job. His initial response is one of worship, tailored to tradition and a unique liturgy whose vocabulary sums life as a progression from birth to finitude. When it dawned on Job that he could not handle what was reported to him by his servants, the author of Job writes,

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name

of the LORD.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing (Job 1:20-22).

Job seems to have been offered a clean slate to start afresh and build his piety. I concur with Hartley who says, “Job did or acted according to the custom, not impetuously and that he acknowledged God’s Lordship over all his possessions and sought consolation from the Almighty.”¹ Job convincingly uses the proverb that one is born poor and dies poor (a proverb that is commonly applicable in a Kenyan setting) to mean that the worldly things end here on earth. Job’s usage points in a different direction, for he acknowledges that though humans are born poor and die poor, all that we possess comes from the Creator. In reality, the implication is that when it comes to matters of life the prerogative is with God, not mortals. Hence, in choosing to follow this avenue, Job leads his audience on a spiritual way to deal with loss. I am in agreement with Hartley who says, “Job’s resignation to the divine will was exemplary.”² It is true that we live in a world that is rife with loss and pain. So the opportunity is availed to both the audience and reader of the book of Job to borrow a leaf from the character of Job who in his grief, “looked to God as his source of strength.”³

Tangible avenues should be constructed, then put to use in the task of seeking ways to tackle the issues that crop up as a result of loss. Saying prayers to the Creator is one of the ways to ask God to intervene during suffering. What type of prayer should this be? No doubt it has to take the form of a lament. Hence the type of liturgy used ascribes to mourning or saying a lament. Most Christian worship services make use of Psalms of

¹ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988), 77.

² *Ibid.*, 78.

³ *Ibid.*, 78.

lament for they help us offer consolation and empathy to those who are undergoing suffering. The lament then is the most convenient way we can express our sorrow and relate with God in times of calamity. At times this might not be easy to achieve, if one runs out of patience and ends up in dismay. Despite this, Job exudes confidence and hope in his answer, “therefore, I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 7:11). I totally support Job here because it would be dangerous for him or any person in such circumstances to pretend all is well when in reality things are not all that good. We must share our experiences and the pain. Emotions should not be suppressed when they come to the surface, provided they do not cause more harm to the person experiencing pain and undergoing suffering. In this lament Job is portraying the lament’s richness as a means to vent out anger and prepare for the next task of healing.

Waiting for people to come and prod us to see where we are feeling pain is not the best way to tackle loss. Instinctively people rush to the scene to offer help and salvage whatever might be salvaged from the chaos, but the story from the victim explains better the calamity and helps to point to what is needed in the suffering. Such crucial information is provided by the survivors or the victims. Job’s situation makes him express his anguish and bitterness which helps to guide us away from the notion that those deemed to be pious can not express bitterness and anguish. Bringing that which is lying under requires that we get to the root of the suffering lest we just address the surface that most often can prove to be just the tip of the iceberg. Job is human and subject to emotions like any other person, therefore, to purport that he has no feelings is misplaced argument. It is healthy to be poised for this wonderful way of countering loss

and pain. Saying a lament is poetic talk, sung by the mourner to self as audience. This song gives one the sense of inward looking, yet is a classic projection and reaches out to God in the richness of dialogue with the spiritual world. I call this searching one's own soul. After venting anger and expressing sorrow we are ready for God's provision and protection.

The role of the Creator is to protect and provide for the suffering creature. This is what Eliphaz expresses in his phrase,

As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause. He does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number. He gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields; he sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety (Job 5:8-11).

Newsom calls this, "the theme of the hope of the pious."⁴ The response the writer of Job expects from his readers is attested to by the fact that all the characters in the dialogue seem to agree that God is capable of bringing a desired restoration which ends suffering. They might only be differing on what is expected of the sufferer. Newsom says of Eliphaz's speech that, "one should not see this language simply as a reference to Job's particular sin but rather as a reference to part of the ordinary practices of self-examination conducted by any pious person engaging in preparation for prayer."⁵

By using figurative language, Zophar explains that what transpires before worship is crucial,

If you direct your heart rightly, you will stretch out your hands toward him. If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and do not let wickedness reside in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure, and will not fear. You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away. And your life will be brighter than the noonday; its darkness

⁴ Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

will be like the morning. And you will have confidence, because there is hope; you will be protected and take your rest in safety. You will lie down, and no one will make you afraid; many will entreat your favor (Job 11:13-19).

Newsom is right in declaring that, “the distancing of sin is the precondition of coming before the presence of God.”⁶ How then do we prepare for worship? This is the question the worshiper needs to answer. Do we still harbor some, ‘small secrets or sins’ that we fear bringing to the Lord in worship? Are our hands that we lift up to the Lord in worship soiled with sin? Is the heart which translates to our spiritual life questionable or is our conscience accusing us?

Most liturgies require that people confess their sins before delving into worship. A good example is found in the two texts. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:8-9), and, “To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets” (Dan 9:9-10). Repentance is a prerequisite for participation in Christian worship. Do the righteous then need to repent before they participate in worship?

There is no doubt that Job is righteous and blameless. He is a role model for society and he cares for those who are tending to his vast estate. It sounds like Job is blowing his own trumpet when he says that, “I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger” (Job 29:14-16).

⁶ Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, 110.

Wolfers says it differently, though, when he affirms that, “while Job’s former prosperity and tranquility were readily interpreted as the signs of righteousness and justice, his present poverty and distress are consequently accepted as the reverse.”⁷ Is Job then guilty and so must suffer? I doubt it.

Job is pious and much concerned with detail. Guarding against the possibility that his children might get entangled in the danger of merry-making during numerous parties, Job routinely offers prayers of supplication for them. While this is in order, it would be better to let the grown up children get involved by participating in worship. He prayed for them, without training them to have access to God in fellowship. Prayers of supplication are important because we show concern for the suffering and needy. Kenyan communities put great significance in prayers of supplication. Irrespective of one’s status in society, when the need is great and one lacks words to use in expressing oneself, then it is common to hear one requesting prayers of healing, journey mercies, and petitions for close family members who would benefit from corporate prayer. Did Job’s children know that their parent was righteous and pious, and was praying for them? If they did, then what role did they take during such prayer sessions?

Before calamity sets in Job is a person of integrity, respected by his community which comprises the young, old, aged, noble and princes. Job is commended for speaking well when he says, “They listened to me, and waited, and kept silence for my counsel” (Job 29:21). I concur with Fyall who groups this chapter among Job’s, “eloquent apologia

⁷ Wolfers. *Deep things out of darkness: The Book of Job, essays and a new English translation*, 130.

for his way of life and a defense of his integrity.”⁸ He was involved in social justice for he delivered the poor and helped the orphan who cried, gave the widows their right of inheritance. Because of his involvement, Job received blessing from the wretched.

God is powerful and good

Despite the suffering that is prevalent in society, God offers us his shoulder on which we can shed our tears. Both happiness and sadness are intertwined in reality in life. Yes, suffering is inevitable in our lives. Job acknowledges this when he says, “Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt, or is there any flavor in the juice of mallows? My appetite refuses to touch them; they are like food that is loathsome to me” (Job 6:6-7). This reminds me of watermelons, they are tasteless yet somehow have flavor! What is important is their nutritious value. Tewoldemedhin looks at this, ‘tastelessness’ from a different perspective when he says that Job “accuses his friends of speaking words that are unappetizing because they are not sensitive to his situation.”⁹ God, then, is sensitive to our situation of suffering and provides for us, for he is powerful and good.

In Kenya when one is suffering or tasting the bitter dose of suffering, the advice given to those who are yet to experience suffering is that, “The fire wood in the store should not laugh at the one that is burning and being consumed in fire.” Sure, within no time, before the hen can swallow a seed of maize, the same burning befalls the second piece of firewood. And so suffering comes to all, irrespective of status in society. When dealing with suffering we have to look at the holistic life of those in pain and mourning,

⁸ Robert S. Fyall, *Now my eyes have seen you: Images of creation and evil in the book of Job* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 33.

⁹ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 576.

for human beings are just human beings wherever they might be. What is important therefore is how to cope with the situation and possibly come out and continue living a life rich in fellowship with the Creator, fellow humanity and the environment. The power to move out of the pathetic situation of suffering requires reflection not only upon the inward, but the outward relief. Such power comes from the Creator. True, we may seek assistance from friends and immediate neighbors and family, but it is more important to move on and address the spiritual needs for holistic recovery.

God's omnipotence is felt when God appears not to answer Job's demand of being listened to, but commands Job to pay attention and listen to his counsel and advice. Habel says that, "He responds with a challenge that throws the onus of listening back on Job."¹⁰ The omnipotence of the Creator is in the form of a strong storm or wind storm, reminiscent of the chariot of fire and horses of fire that separated Elisha and Elijah when, "Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kgs 2:11). The whirlwind often accompanies divine appearance as is the case in the following few verses, "He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water"; "As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber"; "Then the LORD will appear over them, and his arrow go forth like lightning; the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet and march forth in the whirlwinds of the south" (Ps 18:9-11; Ezek 1:4; Zech 9:14). Newsom says that, "the term whirlwind is used to describe the Theophany in

¹⁰ Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, 546.

‘The living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of lightning’ Ezekiel 1:14.’ The Lord is answering Job out of the whirlwind. “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” Is Job then ignorant? If so, Newsom is convincing when she says that, “Job’s challenge to God is accepted, although not in the way Job anticipated.”¹¹

Humans are not the Creator and so our role in creation is nil, a proof that we can not fully understand solely on our own the divine powers. From a close scrutiny, Newsom gives a simple and clear explanation,

The divine speeches give an insight into the primordial structures of creation as a means of understanding God and the world (Job 28; Prov 8; Sirach 24). The combination of planning activities and the accomplishment of structurally crucial physical activities makes the image a particularly apt illustration of divine counsel as planning and design.¹²

How, then, should we respond to God’s power? This is a reflection Newsom says is, “echoed in personified wisdom’s joyful response to God’s creation of the cosmos (Prov 8:30-31).” God is able to control the chaotic sea which, “in mythic tradition, is often represented as a hostile force.”¹³ Note the following phrases, “Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?”; “When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook” (Isa 51:10; Ps 77:16-18). God restrains the sea of chaos and suffering, a hostile alien power. I agree

¹¹ Newsom, “The Book of Job”, 600-601.

¹² Ibid., 601.

¹³ Ibid., 602.

with Newsom that, “the chaotic waters have a place in God’s design of the cosmos, yet one that is clearly circumscribed. They are the object not only of divine restriction but also of divine care.”¹⁴ The reality is that the sea is both useful and destructive. It can be said to be calm as well as raging and dangerous.

To the great birds of the air God provides the wisdom to soar, the command to make their nests high and sight to see from far away. This is a clear demonstration that God is powerful and his actions cannot be faulted. Janzen captures this by using the quote, “shall one who argues with the Almighty instruct?”¹⁵ Of course not, and therefore Job is offered an open space to make amendments to his relationship with the Lord. The question, “shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?” (Job 40:2a) should not only be answered by Job and his friends, but also by the reader of Job and those who blame God as the architect of suffering. While seeking to respond to suffering one should guard against anger, pride, wickedness and self-aggrandizement. The prophet Jeremiah is a good example when he says that, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts” (Jer 15:16). We the readers are challenged as Janzen says, “To a deeper loyalty and vocational endurance.”¹⁶

Restoration by the Creator ends suffering

God draws a plan to follow so that restoration, reconciliation, fellowship and reunion are attained. Janzen says that, “the sense of the chasm between divine wisdom

¹⁴ Newsom, “The Book of Job”, 602.

¹⁵ Janzen, *Job*, 241.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

and the human condition is not ontologically determined and unbridgeable, but has arisen historically and therefore, perhaps, may historically be bridged.”¹⁷ Job realizes that he cannot contend with God who he reports to have, “said to humankind, 'truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding'” (Job 28:28). These same words are echoed later on by Job, who from his suffering now understands their significance. To this effect he says, “I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). According to Hartley, “Job’s concession means that he believes everything occurring on earth takes place within the framework of divine wisdom.”¹⁸ God can be relied upon to avert suffering in that by his presence now the distant hearing becomes the tangible. Brought within sight are the mysteries and wonders God has created and performs. When the truth resurfaces Job regains his spiritual sight and immediately responds by first despising self, then repenting.

This is the turning point from suffering and moving on to desired healing and necessary adaptation. Though Job’s friends do not seem to grasp the role taken by God in the suffering, still Job performs true worship offering prayers of supplication and thanksgiving that are subsequently accepted by the Lord. Suffering comes to an end and one’s fortunes are restored. Reunion and fellowship follow or sympathy, comfort, care, sharing, and more blessings than in the previous life.

We live in a community that embraces economic, political, social, cultural and religious modes of existence. In order to minimize the amount and frequency of suffering, it is important that all these spheres of human life be considered. Because

¹⁷ Janzen, *Job*, 200.

¹⁸ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 535.

God's goodness transcends the whole spectrum of life, true worship allows for healthy living in a world full of suffering. We, the readers of Job, need to be challenged by the words the author uses coined in the phrase, "Surely one does not turn against the needy, when in disaster they cry for help. Did I not weep for those whose day was hard? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?" (Job 30:24-25). This augurs well with Fyall's observation that, "Job's sudden reversal to extreme pessimism and despair is the result of his reliving the happy past in chapter 29."¹⁹ Though the book of Job strives to give an exposition to the question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" I find this question a challenge like, "a big slippery bone for a dog to gnaw at" as such from the beginning the task is as challenging as it can be, a tough exercise! From whatever facet of this diamond one chooses to view this intricate topic, the question continues to allow more open and unending debate. You cannot close the chapter of Job, but God somehow gives us a breakthrough on how to encounter suffering and pain in this dynamic and challenging world.

God plans for the kind of worship that is to take place and gives the reason as to why this should be so. The reason is that Job's friends are in the wrong, and therefore the need for them to offer up for themselves a burnt offering. Then they are to amend their relationship with Job for they had wronged him while he was in the right. They have fallen into sin by speaking falsely of God, saying he is the one responsible for human suffering especially to the pious. Job's role is to offer prayers of supplication for his friends. Job appears to have held a priestly role in that, "the Lord accepted Job's prayer" (Job 42:9b). Habel draws some parallels with the narrative of Abraham with the men who were headed to destroy Sodom. He points out how Job,

¹⁹ Fyall, *Now my eyes have seen you: Images of creation and evil in the book of Job*, 111.

Is again to operate as a patriarchal intercessor like Abraham who came near the Lord and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?’ (Gen 18:23-24).²⁰

Obedience brings good tidings, the fortunes of Job are restored and he is given twice as much as before. Something that is very surprising is that there is reunion with the family members, relatives and the wider community. For the first time the scene changes and takes place in Job’s house. Why is it that the people now come to Job when apparently he has come out of the suffering and pain? Is this a kind of celebration or thanksgiving now that he is no longer to be viewed by the community as one who is cursed? The author of Job writes that,

Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring (Job 42:11)

I concur with Tewoldemedhin who asks whether, “the comforting and consoling is not a little too late?” then goes on to draw a parallel from the Amharic saying that, “the dog barked after the hyena had left.”²¹ I wonder whether this is genuine sympathy and comfort. Why a piece of money and a gold ring? And did the Lord bring evil upon Job?

Blessings are given to Job in the latter days of his life more than his beginning. Apart from owning, “fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys,” he also had, “seven sons and three daughters.” The author of Job is spreading the tent of inheritance to include the female which is a challenge to a predominantly patriarchal society. These daughters were beautiful, “and

²⁰ Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, 584.

²¹ Habtu, “Job” in Tokunboh Adeyemo et al (ed), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 604.

their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers” (Job 42:15b). What happened to Job’s wife in the new life after Job received his healing and come out of mourning? Did she change her mind about the need for Job to curse God and die? It is likely that she did, for now there was healing and living life anew. Does Job then represent his wife in worship? Job is one who boasts as it is explicit in the words, “I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth” (Job 29:15-17). I am certain that such tradition has been overtaken by events. Women are now free to participate as well as lead in worship service. We have more and more women theologians.

Job had been afraid of impending death due to the suffering and pain inflicted upon his physical being. Still death comes when it is really a relief, for now he has no complaint to raise. No one would. “Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations” (Job 42:16). The book concludes in a word of poetry, “And Job died, old and full of days” (Job 42:17). Job’s wish is granted for he had anticipated this when he said, “Then I thought, 'I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix; my roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches;” (Job 29:18-19). These words show fulfillment and satisfaction. He lived to fullness of life. Hartley gives comparisons to other patriarchs when he says,

This epitaph is the same as that used for the noblest among God’s servants, i.e., Abraham , “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people”(Gen 25:8); Isaac, “And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him”(Gen 35:29); David, “He died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honor; and his son Solomon succeeded him” (1 Chr

29:28) and Jehoiada the priest, “But Jehoiada grew old and full of days, and died; he was one hundred thirty years old at his death (2 Chr 24:15).²²

When people of such an age die there is celebration and the death is welcome by all. In Kenya there is no mourning for the demise of someone at that age. It is a desired death.

I agree with Hartley, who says that,

While the book of Job does not categorically reject the doctrine of retribution, it endeavors ardently to correct erroneous applications of that doctrine, especially the view that suffering is conclusive proof that the sufferer has sinned, that the righteous always prosper and that the wicked are swiftly punished for their evil deeds.²³

Job, the character, has persistently focused on righteousness to the end. In real life, persons with such qualities are rare. Job, I am convinced, cuts an ideal character of one who is grounded in faith. He compares to the patriarchs, like Abraham, the father of faith. In Kenya a text from Job is fittingly read during burial ceremonies and special songs composed from the verses concerning the skin and worms that were Job in suffering. The song ends with Job regaining his “heart” back. The mourners identify with the character of Job in the belief that suffering, pain and loss are a reality in life, but short-lived for there will be another life to live. After the suffering all is not lost, those still living, encourage as well as caution each other saying, “today is me tomorrow is you.” This signifies that suffering can befall anyone within the twinkle of an eye. Job is righteous but he suffered because suffering comes to people and not trees. The solution therefore is for the believer to be encouraged to continually pray in supplication and to say laments during calamity. Through such prayers we are sure to experience the goodness of our Creator.

²² Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 544.

²³ *Ibid.*, 544.

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