
Justice, Integrity, Friendship, and Suffering; a Reading of *Job*

Norbert Hornstein

Job is one of the great miracles of the Tanakh. Aside from being one of the most beautifully written books in the Bible, it is also one of the most provocative. But for all of its beauty and power, the book leaves many readers dissatisfied. It never satisfactorily resolves the problem that the modern reader takes to be the main point, the problem of evil in a just universe.

Though it is tempting to read *Job* as addressing this issue, I believe its real interest lies elsewhere. *Job* is less an essay on the metaphysics of morals—how a just God can permit/commit evil—than a poetic examination of a theme in moral psychology—what are the costs of acting on the basis of the belief in a perfectly just universe. I will begin, however, with the problem of evil.

This problem is layered in its complexity and invites different readings of *Job*. Consider two.

Many have taken the main question of the book to be: how can a just God permit bad things to happen to good people? God provides an answer at the end of the book: what we see as bad things happening to good people is a failure of our necessarily limited imagination and intellect. This is echoed centuries later in the philosophy of Leibniz, who argues that the best overall universe may have as a design feature that (what *we* would call) “bad” things happen within it. Leibniz’s argument is that these “bad” things are not “really” bad, as any other configuration of the universe would have had even less savory consequences. As we might say today, building a universe requires trade offs. There are many valuable ends and putting them all together means making compromises. Even if one believes that one can globally reconcile all the potentially conflicting ends we find valuable, this global harmony may have local traps where things *appear* to be off kilter. What we see as God’s

failures can be understood as the optimal solution to reconciling desiderata that, at the very least, do not fit cleanly together.

There is a second related, but far harsher, reading of the text. It centers on the existence of evil. There have been attempts to make room for evil in a theistic context. Manicheans, for example, postulate two rival deities whose struggle for domination has very unfortunate consequences for mere mortals. However, in a monotheistic context such as Judaism, the existence of evil is a more serious problem for, if pursued to the bitter end, it puts to question the viability of the traditional conception of a deity who is at once all powerful, beneficent, and personal, concerned with the course of human affairs. If God is all powerful, how can he escape responsibility for evil in the universe, especially evil things that happen to *us*? Something has got to give; either God's power or goodness or God's personal concern with us. *Job* is often read as addressing this problem in a very direct way.

The Story

The book opens with a description of Job and a behind-the-scenes discussion between God and Satan in Heaven. We are told how terrific Job is and how wonderful and plentiful are his blessings. He is rich, powerful, has a big family, is well respected, enjoys good health. The text explicitly links his well-being to his righteousness and we are meant to see Job as a person who both does good and lives well because he does good.

After this thumbnail portrait of Job, we are whisked away to the heavens where God, after some banter with Satan, agrees—at Satan's behest—to test Job. God allows Satan to deprive Job of his good fortune, stripping him of his possessions and killing off his family. When this does not lead to any apparent diminution in Job's righteous behavior, God allows Satan to insult Job's person by covering him from top to bottom in boils, and inflicting him with respiratory ailments, insomnia, and worse. In fact, God permits Satan to inflict every harm on Job except death.

It is noteworthy that the author implicates God in Job's fate very directly. While Satan is the active "torturer," God is depicted as giving the green light, signing off on what he knows will be a very grizzly set of attacks on Job's property, family, and person.

God's connivance is critical to what follows. The author's description of the heavenly events forces our attention on the problem of evil, as opposed to

the related, but less religiously problematic notion of misfortunes or bads. In fact, the opening scenario pins the existence of evil directly on God. The text indicates that God actually commits an evil act, giving the orders to torture Job. God is not simply a passive bystander who allows evil to occur by failing to intervene to prevent it. It may be difficult to pin down exactly what evil is but certainly the conscious torturing of a man who is good and whom one knows and believes to be good (as God repeatedly affirms) to see whether he will crack if you push him far enough, is a paradigm case.

The question of evil is deeply fascinating, and there is clearly a way of reading *Job* that puts it at the center. And yet, I do not think that this is the focus of the book—for the simple reason that this question receives no real answer in the text.

The answer that God gives at the end of *Job* about how great and powerful God is and how puny we are has the feel of the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which Toto pulls back the curtain and we see the nebbishy "wizard" behind the pyrotechnics and bluster. God is no nebbish in *Job* (he did after all create the universe) but, seen in the context of the opening sections of the book, the argument God makes is pure bluster. In fact, it may be worse than this. We the readers *saw* why God did what he did. We were there when God okayed Satan's suggestion that Job be tested. Consequently, we know that what God says at the end intentionally mischaracterizes the reasons for Job's tortures. Given the initial stage setting, it is hard to take God's remarks as anything but a combination of bullying and diversion. The story says very clearly that God tortured Job *because* he was good. If Job had not been righteous, then torturing him would not have made sense, as it would not have been a test of his righteousness. But doing this to Job for this very reason is precisely what makes it evil. What God says may (or may not) satisfy Job but it cannot satisfy *us* given what we know. The juxtaposition of the early sections with God's later words hollow out God's message.

Thus, if *Job* raises either of the two questions posed above, it fails to answer either very well. Read as an answer to why bad things happen, God's answer is poetic but thin. We may indeed be too stupid to fully understand but we are not too dim to understand more than we are told. If read as a meditation on evil, it also fails for God never satisfactorily explains why he chose to afflict Job the way he did. In short, the text leaves both questions either thinly addressed or not addressed at all.

Moreover, it is unclear what either interpretation of *Job* does with the middle sections of the book. If the point of *Job* is that we are too puny to understand the universe, then why all the long discussions in the middle of the book in which Job's friends try to comfort him and are repeatedly rebuffed by an angry Job? Their speeches foreshadow many of the points God makes in his answer. Nonetheless, though Job's friends make some of the same points as God does later, God condemns the friends wholesale for their positions. Focusing our attention on Job's sufferings and God's answer leaves the bulk of the book—the interaction of Job and his friends—as a sideshow, a kind of literary filler. And why three interchanges between Job and his friends? Wouldn't one have been enough? More pages are spent on these interchanges than on anything else, and these interchanges display the most vivid dialogue. The mere fact that these middle sections constitute the bulk of the book suggests that this is not the question that most interested the author.

So what is the book about? Its subject is not the metaphysical problem of how bad or evil can exist in a just universe, but an examination of the moral psychology of justice. *Job* is a critique of the idea that humans are capable of being decent if they adopt as personal credos—as guides to behavior and judgment of every day events—a justice-based view of God and the universe. In short, the focus of *Job* is on the coarsening effects that a certain kind of commitment to a just universe can have on our sensibilities, integrity, and humanity. Put another way, the naive conception of justice is that people should get what they deserve. In a religious context, this means that a just God acts in the world to give people their just deserts; the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. *Job* shows the unseemly consequences of this seemingly reasonable ideal if taken as a personal credo in the world in which we live.

***Job* is a critique of the idea that humans are capable of being decent if they adopt as personal credos... a justice-based view of God and the universe.**

The Moral Psychology of Justice

Let's start simple. Most of *Job* is given over to a discussion between Job and his friends who have come to his house to comfort him in his affliction. The text makes two points very clearly. First, the friends are stunned by the extent of Job's suffering. In fact, they are rendered initially speechless. This suggests that the friends cannot really understand what Job could have done to deserve his fate. Second, Job's friends are people who consider Job a role model and who are trying to do for him what he had done for many others in similar circumstances of misfortune. It may be surmised that they pattern their remarks and behavior on actions that Job took when he went out to console the unfortunate. The text makes clear that their behavior is considered by the wise as appropriate for Job's circumstances.

The text also makes clear that if the friends' goal was to comfort Job, they fail miserably. At first, they do little more than anger Job, adding to Job's misery rather than relieving it. The friends come off as fatuous, if not worse. Their moral glibness pales in comparison to Job's rage and suffering. The author clearly intends us to sympathize with Job's anger at their insufferable moral self-satisfaction. And even though the friends defend God to Job, God sides with Job, not with them. In fact, God condemns them and only relents because Job stands with them at the end of the book.

What are we to make of this? Here are three decent people who come to comfort Job and help him in his time of travail yet seem incapable of doing so to Job's satisfaction, to God's satisfaction, or to our own satisfaction. What is the author telling us? Consider what the three interlocutors say. There is a common core to all of their remarks which boils down to this: you had it coming, Job! They say this gingerly at first but by the end of their third rounds this message comes out loud and clear. What imparts the tone of self-satisfaction is the hardly disguised implication that if they are not in the same boat as Job it is because, unlike Job, they don't deserve to be.

So what the author depicts are people who have clearly lost their moral centers. In face of enormous suffering, they blame the victim and congratulate themselves. The author's point is that this behavior is not an aberration. It is not the reaction of three morally insensitive clods. Rather, it is the byproduct of a cosmic view that insists that God is just and that he promotes justice in the universe in which we live our daily lives. In other words, if we accept the idea that God rewards the righteous and punishes the malefactors, then this dictates

that the correct approach to suffering is not compassion but reproof. The poor, the sick, the lame, the unfortunate have it coming! The correct response to suffering given this world view is the one that the friends engage in: insisting to Job that he must have done something wrong and that he deserves what he is getting even if he cannot figure out what or why. What the author makes poetically vivid in the chapters in which the friends speak is how repugnant this attitude is in the face of real tragedy and suffering.

The friends' remarks are horrid on various levels. They clearly aggravate Job's suffering. By adopting this stance, the friends can be of no use to him as they cannot commiserate. Their view of God's justice requires them to think that Job is getting his just deserts even if neither they nor Job can see how. This strips them of their capacity for compassion because they cannot feel with Job without also criticizing God. In effect, the author shows us the dark side of what appears to be the attractive picture that God acts to promote justice in the universe. One casualty of this view is that it makes true friendship and community impossible by robbing us of our sense of, and capacity for, compassion.

It also makes true friendship harder in a second way. Recall that the friends were initially shocked by Job's travails. Why so? Because they all believed that Job was indeed a righteous man. What shocks the friends is the extent of Job's afflictions. They could have understood some trouble, after all even Job was not perfect. But Job's suffering is out of all proportion to any wrong they would have believed he could have committed. This is a point that Job himself makes. To reconcile what the friends know about Job with their sense that God is just, the friends conclude that they were massively wrong about Job. This allows them to progressively amplify their criticisms of him. Job could not have been a righteous man nor even a very good one. Job must have been a malefactor for otherwise this degree of divine punishment would make no sense.

This degree of error concerning Job's "true" character cannot but undermine bonds of friendship and solidarity. If the friends hold onto their

**Job comes close
to devaluing his
own moral conduct
precisely by saying,
"You can't do this to
me! I'm a great guy!"**

views of a just God and a just universe, they must be ready to disown their earlier views of Job wholesale: despite all appearances to the contrary Job must have been a moral monster, or a just God would not have so afflicted him! Friendship cannot survive a situation in which this kind of radical error is possible, where the bases of friendship—one's judgments about another's character—are all too easily undermined.

This world view has yet another corrosive effect. It comes out in Job's replies to his interlocutors. Job defends himself to them and to God in two ways. First, by ticking off his various good deeds and virtues: how he helped the poor, the widow, the orphan. How he was always pious, never stole, wasn't lustful or greedy. Perfect in every way. Second, how he really is insignificant and why should God care to go out of his way to do this to him.

Both types of remarks are unseemly. The first strikes at Job's integrity. It suggests that Job sees his own good deeds purely instrumentally, things one does for insurance purposes. Seen in this way, Job's speeches play into Satan's observations that Job is good because one does very well by so being. What the poet makes clear is that Job's position follows seamlessly from the view of things he shares with his friends. Thus, Job is led to undermine his own best actions, his own integrity, by a world view that requires that they be instrumentally valuable. Job comes close to devaluing his own moral conduct precisely by saying, "You can't do this to me! I'm a great guy!" The author makes the self-defeating nature of this claim poetically evident.

The other defense is equally self-denigrating. Job's claims to being unworthy of such suffering sit ill with any robust notion of self-respect. Together with his earlier argument, his answers to his friends work by undermining his integrity and moral worth. This is not what Job intends. However, through the poetry of these sections of the book, this is where Job ends up. Like his friends, he is trapped by the view of a just God in a just universe into demeaning himself in the face of suffering.

Job has other problems as well. He knows he has done nothing wrong. But he also believes in a just God. His options are to deny himself and his experience, to blame God, or to indulge in self-recrimination. None of these options is attractive given the circumstances. They simply add to Job's suffering. Job's friends are in a similar bind: they either deny what they took to be obvious truths about Job—that he was a good man worth befriending and emulating—or that the universe is ruled over by a just God who punishes the

wicked and rewards the righteous. The fact that the friends finally are reduced to silence by Job suggests that they come to appreciate that neither alternative can be wholeheartedly endorsed. The message of the text is loud and clear: there is something wrong with an ethic that leaves the sufferers and their comforters at such a complete loss to deal with their predicaments.

The author of *Job* has noticed that the metaphysically pleasing view of a just universe presided over by a just God has baleful consequences for us if considered in the context of misfortune. It renders us incapable of compassion, forces us to blame the victim, robs the victim of his/her self worth, undermines his/her integrity, and acts to corrode the bonds of friendship and solidarity. The author does not *argue* for these conclusions but demonstrates them by making us consider the words and thoughts of people in circumstances of suffering. Job's friends are not horrible people, though their views lead them to act insensitively and self-righteously and to judge glibly. Job is a good man but these same views leave him with nothing to salvage his self-respect and integrity in the face of suffering. In short, the vision of a just God guiding the universe justly leaves no room for compassion, integrity, solidarity, or friendship in the face of suffering.

What is the alternative? I believe that God's speech at the end of the book should be read as providing a setting for a different moral psychology. Given the beings we are, it is only if we recognize our limitations that decency is possible. We must decline to take God's eye view of things because of what it does to us as moral agents. Even if we have the religious conviction that the universe is ultimately just and ruled by a just God, we should not adopt this as a belief for regulating our everyday lives, judging our circumstances, treating our friends, or living with others. The consequences *for us* of adopting God's vantage point is that it dehumanizes us. With this conclusion as background, God's speech provides independent reasons for rejecting God's stance as our own. God's speech compares our powers to his. This comparison makes clear just how unfit we are to assume his point of view by emphasizing how puny our powers are in comparison to his. God's speech suggests that it is presumptuous of humans to adopt God's vantage point.

In this reading, what shuts Job up in the end is his understanding that we are too removed from God to adopt his perspective on the universe, and that the recognition and acceptance of our human limitations is required

if we are to lead decent lives. We can choose to take God's point of view, but in our context, it has very harsh consequences if we adopt it fully. It robs us of our humanity and integrity and makes us incapable of decency when life turns against us. It ultimately makes friendship and community impossible. This is a very high price to pay for unalloyed justice. In addition, God's speech emphasizes that there is more than a touch of hubris in taking the cosmic view of the universe implicit in the traditional view.

The book ends with Job restored to his good fortune but with two twists. First, the friends sit and grieve with Job for his earlier misfortune. They don't lecture him; they commiserate. Second, Job's daughters are no longer subordinate to his sons as they were in their previous incarnations. They share equally in Job's patrimony and are singled out for their great beauty. Compassion is often depicted as a feminine virtue, justice as male. The elevation of Job's daughters is a fitting end to a book that challenges the elevation of Justice and Desert above all else.

