

**Testamentum Imperium**  
An International Theological Journal

[www.PreciousHeart.net/ti](http://www.PreciousHeart.net/ti)

**Volume 2 – 2009**

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**The Sovereignty of God in the Book of Job:  
God Used Job to Change Theology**

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**Introduction**

The Book of Job shows that a person may not be able to understand why he is suffering. This is precisely because of God's sovereignty. Since God retains the right to inflict suffering on whomever he pleases (Job 1-2), we cannot expect our evaluations of our behavior to gauge whether or not we will suffer in the future. God's speeches to Job in Job 38-41 defend his authority to govern his creation without being accountable to mankind for his actions. His basic premise is that we are incapable of judging him because his capacities and responsibilities are too great for us to understand.<sup>2</sup>

Though we may be unable to fathom the purpose behind our own suffering, the Book of Job does not leave us clueless about why Job needed to suffer. It offers several reasons why Job's suffering was

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<sup>1</sup> Contributions in books include "Genesis 12-24," in *Genesis-Deuteronomy*, ed. Eugene H. Merrill, in *The Bible Knowledge Word Study* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2003); "Perseverance and Eternal Security in the Psalms," in *Perspectives on Eternal Security: Biblical, Historical, and Philosophical*, eds. Kirk R. MacGregor and Kevauahn Mattis (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, publication forthcoming). Harold can be contacted at [hholmyard3@earthlink.net](mailto:hholmyard3@earthlink.net).

<sup>2</sup> A book that treats most major themes in Job is Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Nearly every source cited in this paper is available in this book.

beneficial. But it does not present them explicitly but only through circumstantial evidence. This evidence can not only affirm God's righteous and loving character but can underscore why God must exercise a sovereignty that is not accountable to man.

The readers of Job from the outset understand far more than Job could about why he suffered. So it is not inappropriate for them to understand something of why Job needed to suffer, even if God did not feel it was suitable to explain it to Job. It would be odd if the Book of Job, so profound in many ways, left us no explanation for the wager between God and Satan about Job's loyalty to God under affliction.

According to Scripture (e.g., Pss. 44:21, 94:11; Isa. 46:10; Dan. 10:21; 11:1-12:3), God knows everything, both the hearts of individuals and their future actions. So God had no personal need to put Job through suffering. He already knew Job's heart and how he would respond. On the other hand, Satan was a murderer from the beginning, and there is no truth in him (Jn. 8:44). So God had no prospect of changing Satan's heart through Job's testimony. Therefore, Job's suffering was probably for the benefit of Job and the society in which he lived. Satan wished to prove that Job served God for selfish reasons, but God could have allowed the suffering for reasons besides proving the genuineness of Job's faith. At least with Job, the suffering purified his relationship with God and reformed his thinking about God. But the implications for his society may have been just as profound.

Some readers do not trust God's wisdom, seeing the God of Job as cavalier in making a wager (Job 1-2) that would involve the death of Job's children and the loss of his wealth and health. Others view God's speech to Job (Job 38-41) as bombastic in its focus on creation rather than an explanation of why Job suffered. God's critics stumble over his sovereignty, which God insists upon. If the Book of Job is correct that mankind is unqualified to judge God, then such criticisms lack force. Job's own repentance and retraction of his accusations of divine injustice (Job 42:1-6) suggest that God's behavior became acceptable to him. And the prior misguided thinking of both Job and his friends (Job 3-31) shows why explanations by God would not necessarily have been helpful. If the society was not thinking rightly, how could they properly evaluate any explanations God gave?

What follows will be an exploration of why Job was chosen for suffering and why this suffering was part of God's redemptive plan. Some may think it goes beyond what is written to offer an explanation for Job's suffering, but the book allows inferences to be drawn. Job's circumstances while under affliction offer the best justification for God's imposition of suffering.

#### **A. The Problem of Prompt Retribution**

Some have seen the Book of Job as a refutation of belief in prompt divine retribution. God condemns Job's three friends for not speaking truly about God (Job 42:7), and what they taught was that a person's experience was a mirror of his standing with God. If one was prospering, he was rightly related to God. If he was suffering, he was under God's judgment for particular sins. Eliphaz began by assuming this (4:7-9), as did Bildad (8:3-6) and Zophar (11:6, 11, 20). Job knew this was not true because he had done nothing wrong and yet was suffering. The reader also knows this is not true because God told Satan that Job did not deserve to suffer (2:3). So Job defended himself against the insinuations of the three friends that he must have sinned.

They continued to paint suffering as the outcome for the sinner, being unable to avoid concluding that Job's suffering put him in this category. Job would recount his sufferings (e.g., ch. 19), and one of the friends would follow with a similar list of sufferings that the wicked undergo (e.g., ch. 20). Eliphaz openly called Job a sinner (15:5-6), saying that a wicked man writhes in pain all his days (15:20-35). Bildad rebuked Job by insisting that the light of the wicked is extinguished (18:4-21), as did Zophar (20:4-29). Job countered by citing evidence that many unrighteous people did not suffer (21:7-34). Eliphaz closed by imagining all the sins Job must have committed in his great wickedness that caused his present troubles (22:4-11). Job related how the innocent and righteous often do not have God's protection (24:1-21; cf. 9:22-24; 12:6), even if he ultimately punishes the wicked (24:22-25). Bildad closed with a reminder of man's universal sinfulness, and Zophar did not try to respond in the final round of exchanges.

The three cycles of dialogue show the friends growing more strident and entrenched in their condemnation of Job, and Job more and more alienated from them. Job's three companions were devout

and aged, and they came to Job with a real concern for him. They traveled from some distance to comfort him. They wept aloud and tore their robes in grief at the sight of him, throwing dust on themselves. They sat in silence with him for seven days, sharing his sorrow. These were true friends, yet their theology ultimately prevented them from fulfilling the role of friends. Retribution thinking turned them against Job at just the time when he needed their sympathy. Job increasingly complained about their miserable comfort (16:1; 21:34). They succeeded only in reproaching and attacking him (19:3). They wronged him (21:27), and he would never admit they were right (27:5). Our deepest beliefs guide our behavior, and these men ultimately responded to Job on the basis of their belief that God unfailingly and promptly rewards the righteous and punishes the unrighteous.

However, Job cited considerable evidence that this is not the way the world works. They did not process these facts but persisted in their notion that Job's suffering had to be due to some terrible sins he had committed. This persistence shows how fixed retribution theology was in that culture, because it undermined their friendship with Job. When Job wished for his enemy to be like the wicked, his adversary like the unjust (27:7), one wonders whether he included these three men in such categories. Their theology eroded feelings of sympathy and compassion that should have governed their behavior and that they evidently had wanted to show. It turned them into harsh accusers who brought Job almost as much pain as his original suffering. Job knew that a despairing man should have the devotion of his friends (6:14), but his friends were of no help (6:21) because of their unrelenting accusation (6:29), which was false (13:4).

The hold of retribution theology was so strong that Job himself could not shake free of it, despite the facts that he presented against it. He also affirmed the destruction of the wicked (24:18-24; 27:8-23). So he was ambivalent, since he elsewhere denied God's punishment of the wicked (cf. 21:7-33). Retribution thinking turned him against God at just the time he needed the solace of faith in God. That's why he kept accusing God of being unjust. He, too, felt that good deeds should be rewarded and evil ones punished. If an upright man like himself was suffering evil, then God was wrongly targeting an innocent man (16:12, 17; 19:6-7). The significance of Job's views is

that he was someone God acknowledged as unique on earth, a blameless and upright person who feared and served God while shunning evil (1:8). He was someone one would expect to have the clearest views of God in that culture, yet his theology did not permit him to maintain a serene trust and submission to the Lord in his trial. Retribution theology turned Job's attitude towards God into a critical, suspicious, and somewhat hostile one. He did not forsake God, but he was unable to maintain peace because God's actions did not match what Job's theology demanded that God do.

He could not yield himself to God's care when he felt that God was treating him as an enemy (13:24; 19:11; 33:10). Job called God his enemy (Job 16:9). He viewed all things as coming directly from God and representing God's attitude towards him. God's hand had struck him, God's anger burned against him, and God pursued him (19:11, 21-22). His circumstances conveyed divine anger and attack (16:9). His gauntness testified against him (16:8).

The rest of Job's society viewed things similarly. They turned against Job at the time he needed their support, even though he had earlier been the leader in his community and had done nothing outwardly wrong. Chapters 29-30 provide a severe contrast to Job's youthful success by stating that people now mocked him (30:1). Sons of the basest men in town ridiculed him in songs and proverbs (30:1-9). They detested him, stayed away from him, and spit in his face (30:10). People put off restraint in his presence, attacking him, laying snares for him, and trying to destroy him (30:11-13). They advanced against him like invading troops (30:14), evidently feeling this widespread response was an honorable one. Job was filled with terror because of such threats (30:15). Because he viewed circumstances as God's direct dealings, the viciousness of his neighbors was further proof to him that God was attacking him ruthlessly (30:21). Why would people mock Job in songs and spit in his face unless they felt that his terrible circumstances reflected terrible sin? If they thought God was punishing him, he deserved no sympathy. Rather, it was appropriate to treat such a sinner as a pariah.

Job's mournful words in chapter 30 were not the first time that he mentioned the general rejection he faced. Earlier he spoke of becoming a laughingstock to his friends, and of people having contempt for his misfortune as the deserved fate of someone whose

feet were slipping (12:4-5). His three friends made speeches against him (16:4), but others did too, jeering at Job and striking his cheek in scorn (16:10). He was a victim of evil men (16:11). Mockers surrounded him and looked at him with hostility (17:2). Friends were apparently denouncing him with some prospect of a reward from others (17:5). Job had become a byword to everyone, someone in whose face people spit (17:6). Why would everyone treat Job this way unless they shared common sentiments that his sufferings implied an evil character? People felt nothing but contempt for Job, since they evidently read his downfall as a sign that God had rejected him. That's the way Job himself interpreted his situation (10:3).

Granting that Job's painful sores over his entire body (2:7-8) could have made him physically repulsive, the reaction of those near to him seems to go beyond physical revulsion to reflect the same attitude as the general populace. Job was alienated from both his relatives and acquaintances (19:13-14). People stayed away from him, and even those living in his house and maidservants treated him like a stranger (19:15). Servants no longer responded when he summoned them (19:16). His breath was strange to his wife, and he was loathsome to his own brothers (19:17). Little boys rejected and spoke against him (19:18). Job's closest friends abhorred him, and those he loved had turned against him (19:18). Mere physical unpleasantness does not account for such cold treatment by beloved friends and family. But if they shared Job's retribution theology, they might easily have concluded that fellowship with Job was associating with someone God had marked as evil. If they thought Job was undergoing the pains due to the wicked, they may have considered it wise to avoid him and express rejection of him. They apparently were tempted to think thoughts like (19:28): "How we will persecute him since the root of the problem is found in him!"

Eliphaz seems to have considered that Job had fallen under a curse. He rebuked Job by comparing him to a fool in his outcry, and then he spoke of seeing a fool whose house was suddenly cursed, whose children were far from safety, and who lost his wealth (5:1-7). He did not imply that the fool he saw was Job, but the linkage and similar circumstances suggest he viewed Job as similar. The ancients felt that a divine curse did not fall without due cause (Prov. 26:2).

The cause would be some sin in the person cursed, and this is why people could assume that the root of the matter lay within Job.

Yet Job had once been honored in his homeland of Uz. In Job 29 he recounts how he took his seat in the public square. Young men deferred to him, old men rose in respect, and chief men grew silent (v7-10). He was widely praised (v11), with people waiting for his counsel and attention (v21-24). He helped the needy (v12-13, 15-16) and defeated the wicked (v17). He sat as the chief among his people (v25). The sole change in Job now was that he had suffered.

Some researchers place the land of Uz southeast of Edom.<sup>3</sup> Eliphaz was from another locale, either the Teman in Edom or the Teman in the Arabian desert. Bildad was a Shuhite, perhaps a descendant of Abraham's youngest son Shuah (Gen. 25:2), from yet another place. And Zophar as a Namaathite may have come from a Canaanite town Naamah near Edom (Josh. 15:41). These men journeyed from their homes to meet at an agreed spot in order to visit Job (2:11). The fact that they all shared the same theology of retribution with Job suggests that it pervaded their culture.

Young Elihu, while disparaging their dialogue, acknowledged that Job and his three friends were wise, learned people (34:2). They represented the cream of the crop of that society, and this is another reason to expect that their beliefs were widely shared. Elihu saw that the three friends were wrong to condemn Job when they could not refute him (32:3, 5) or answer his arguments (32:12). Yet he realized that Job's justification of himself rather than God was improper (32:2), as was his complaint that God did not answer him (33:12-13). Elihu replied that God communicates in many ways and allows suffering for many reasons (33:14-30; 34:11, 18-20, 24-30; 36:5-21). He insisted on God's rectitude and did not try to account for the precise reason why Job had suffered, yet he did not explicitly reject the strict retribution thinking that governed the concepts of the other men.

This was an age with seemingly widespread acceptance of God's reality. There has been some scholarly agreement that the setting of the Book of Job is in the second millennium B.C., in part due to

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<sup>3</sup> G. Frederick Owen, "Uz," in *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 5:852-53.

genre.<sup>4</sup> The age of Job is also a pointer to the great antiquity of this culture. Job was not young when his sufferings came, since he had seven adult children, several of whom lived in their own homes (1:2, 4). Elihu considered Job “old” (32:6), but Job lived 140 years after his suffering was over (42:16). So he could have lived 200 years, which would likely place him among the early post-Flood generations, perhaps about the time of Terah, Abraham’s father, who lived 205 years (Gen. 11:32).

One might theorize that proximity to the Flood inclined people to think of God as swift and complete in retribution. He had wiped out almost the entire race because of its sin. He had rewarded righteous Noah and his family by preserving them. Whether this is relevant or not, Job’s society was governed by the concept that a person’s lot was the outcome of his righteousness or unrighteousness. Although people like Job could see facts that did not comport with this outlook, they evidently were unable to discard the view.

This culture full of retribution theology was dysfunctional. God’s two greatest commandments are that we love Him and one another (Mt. 22:36-40), but friends could not comfort each other in their hour of bereavement and loss. Neighbors could not rally around an afflicted person. A devout person could not trust God in times of suffering. The Book of Job instructs readers that God does not operate the way these people were thinking, since he afflicted Job without a sinful cause in Job. The society’s ideas failed to be helpful or to match reality, but they also challenged God’s sovereignty. Job’s friends put God in a box by assuming that consequence B demanded cause A, even though God in his freedom actually had other causes. Job challenged God’s sovereignty by requiring that God act according to Job’s standards of what was just. If God could not convict Job of great sins, Job felt God had no right to impose great suffering on him. The society’s worldview in one sense did not have God as fully sovereign since he had to conform to their ideas of retribution. Unrealistic thinking had perverse consequences.

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<sup>4</sup> B. Lynne Newell, “Job: Repentant or Rebellious,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 300.



## **B. Job's Place in God's Redemptive Plan**

God in heaven agreed to let Satan ruin Job without cause (Job 2:3) because God saw that this would result in greater good. He doubtless realized that mentioning Job's outstanding service would provoke Satan's animosity towards Job. But the same qualities so hateful or incredible to Satan made Job suitable as one who could explode the myth of retribution theology that Job's society believed. Job was unique in his turning from evil, so he was qualified to bear unjust suffering. Most people failed to shun evil; they were not blameless like Job, so any suffering they experienced could credibly be explained as due to their sin. Job's uniqueness in this regard would ultimately eliminate this justification for his suffering. His society would see that his suffering was basically unrelated to any evil he had committed. They would understand that God inflicted suffering out of his sovereign purposes. They would give up, at least as a bedrock axiom of their theology, that a person's circumstances necessarily reflected the degree to which he pleased God. Job pleased God, yet suffering came on Job. So one could not necessarily explain suffering as due to sin in the sufferer.

This lesson took a long time to learn, since in Jesus' day people were still asking whether a man born blind was suffering because of his sin or his parents' sin (Jn. 9:2). Especially through Christ did mankind learn that a righteous person could suffer undeservedly to accomplish God's will. But Job was a precursor of Christ as an instrument in God's hand to change the circumstances of society through innocent suffering. Job was not perfect in his response to suffering, but his nearly blasphemous comments about God all grew out of a fundamental misunderstanding about retribution that he shared with the rest of his society.<sup>5</sup> It was that misunderstanding that God seems to have aimed to correct.

The importance of Job's story in the history of redemption is apparent not only by its recording in Scripture but by the level of revelation that accompanied it. First, the colloquy between God and

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God: Questions Nobody Asks Aloud* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 165, states that "Job wanders as close to blasphemy as he can get—just to the edge." Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 64, adds: "Job appears to overstep the bounds of humble faith and assume a posture of Promethean arrogance. His obsession with his righteousness borders on hubris and self-righteousness."

the devil in Job 1-2 is virtually unparalleled in Scripture at this early time. Outside of Job 1-2 Satan appears in the OT only about four times (1 Chron. 21:1; Zech. 3:1-2). People in the OT narratives do not speak of Satan or attribute events to him, although a few writers do. The Book of Job is revelation that there are secondary supernatural causes of calamities, so harsh events do not necessarily signal God's anger against an afflicted person. Job seems to have had no realization that satanic activity could cause his suffering. Awareness of that could probably have alleviated his perception that God was attacking him.

The conference between God and Satan also reveals that God afflicts people who are genuinely innocent. This revelation in conjunction with the events in Job's life gave mankind a way to set aside the dysfunctional theology of strict retribution that tended to make an evil person out of every sufferer. God's self-revelation to Job (Job 38-41) supported the truth of God's sovereign freedom in Job 1-2. It clarified that God's justice is beyond humanity's evaluation because of mankind's finite and sinful limitations. Job was the best on earth and yet darkened God's divine counsel for the world by ignorantly accusing God of treating him unfairly (38:2; 40:2, 8). God must retain his freedom over against any human concepts because our concepts are too small (Isa. 55:8-9). The whole of human society can be mistaken in its thinking, so our axioms must not bind God.

Job admitted that he had sinned in his life (Job 14:16-17). He supposed that by this suffering God was causing him to inherit the sins of his youth (13:26). Because of our sin, God does have a certain right to inflict suffering on us, since the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Job's confusion arose because he had not sinned in proportion to his suffering (Job 10:2-7).<sup>6</sup> His imperfect response to his suffering did not erase his blameless life prior to his suffering. God admitted that Job did not deserve such treatment (2:3), so suffering came for some transcendental purpose. The fact that the Book of Job does not plainly lay out that purpose is consistent with its claim that God does not need to give account of himself to man. Human beings can trust

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<sup>6</sup> August H. Konkel, "Job," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, gen. ed., Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2006), 6:21.

that a Being of such awesome purposes as the creation and sustaining of a world has worthy intentions for all his interventions in human life, even those that bring suffering. Elihu noted the impropriety of condemning a righteous, powerful God who freely created mankind and could abandon it to death if he so chose (34:12-17).

Job fulfilled the responsibility that God laid on him by putting him under testing. He maintained his integrity (2:3; 6:29; 27:5-6) despite the trials that could have driven him to forsake it (2:9). He continued to think that God would ultimately clear him of any shadow of guilt (35:2). He had faith that God would ultimately be approachable (23:3-7) and that he himself would eventually find acceptance with God (19:25-27). He publicly maintained his righteousness in such a fierce and tortured way that his society could have no doubt about what he believed (32:1). Then when they learned the circumstances of God's appearance to him, it all fell into place, and they could understand that he suffered as God's servant, not as a flagrant sinner. God called Job his servant three times directly to Eliphaz, ensuring that the truth was not lost to the community (42:7-8). Job was God's appointed priest for the three friends, in this way destroying the notion that one's circumstances reflected how pleasing one was to God. God told Eliphaz that Job spoke rightly about him, but God repudiated Eliphaz's theology and that of Bildad and Zophar (42:7).

Job's speech had been right because he declared that God punished him without cause, while they insisted that he was punished for his sin. Job upheld the mysterious nature of his suffering despite the dominant theology. He rightly accused his friends of being wickedly partial to God in a way that God would rebuke (13:7-11). They tempted him with the false hope that he if confessed his sins, his darkness would turn to light (11:13-17; 17:12). He insisted that he suffered as a righteous person (16:17; 23:11-12). If he had falsely confessed sin, he would have lost his integrity,<sup>7</sup> but his testimony of innocence was what God needed in a demonstration that the righteous may suffer undeservedly as precious instruments in God's plan.

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<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 177-78.

### C. Elihu's Role in Job's Circumstances

But Job did go overboard in his pain, and it is hard to be completely sympathetic to him in many of the things he felt driven to say. Elihu played an important role in rebuking Job's excesses. The fact that Elihu speaks for six chapters shows he is not a peripheral figure. His claim to speak by God's Spirit (32:8; 33:4) is credible. The author makes Elihu's comments a foretaste of what God Himself will say to Job. Rob Machell describes Elihu as the lightning before God's thunder.<sup>8</sup> Both Elihu and God charged Job with speaking without knowledge (34:35; 35:16; 38:2). Both criticized Job for accusing God (34:37; 40:2) and condemning him (34:17; 40:8). Both questioned Job about how God's creation operates (37:14-18; 38:4-39:27). Both spoke of the wonders of the natural world as a testimony to God's greatness beyond human capacity to understand (36:22-37:13; 40:15-41:34). Both indicated that Job was in darkness that made his critical speech misguided (37:19-20; 38:2). Elihu directly defended God as doing no wrong, something God would assert more indirectly. Elihu introduced God by speaking of him coming in a storm (37:1-24) and implying that God has favor for the right-minded.<sup>9</sup>

Elihu realized that it was wrong to accuse God (36:23) and showed that accepting attitudes towards suffering were possible even without revelation. After we hear Elihu, we know that God was being graciously generous when he said that Job had spoken rightly concerning God unlike the three friends (42:8). Job upheld important truths, but Elihu's fervent defense of God against Job's accusations confirm that God's early criticisms of Job's words (e.g., 40:8) were substantial. Elihu knew that God did not have to appear at Job's beckoning (37:19-24), and he asserted truths about God's goodness that needed to be heard after the bitter debates in Job 4-27. Elihu defended God on the grounds of his manifold purposes and his

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<sup>8</sup> Rob Machell, private communication.

<sup>9</sup> The NIV translation of verse 24 seems right: "Therefore, men revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart?" The phrase "wise of heart" always suggests a praiseworthy quality elsewhere in Scripture (Ex. 28:3; 31:6; 35:10; 36:1-2, 8; 1 Kgs. 3:12; Prov. 10:8 (cf. Prov. 16:23; Eccl. 8:5; 10:2). God is described as "wise in heart" at Job 9:4. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910) 473 (§150a), note that questions can begin with the negative  $\text{לֹא}$  and no explicit interrogative markers.

superiority to man, but he had not suffered, and God knew that Job spoke out of great grief and provocation.

On the other hand, Elihu had no specific explanation for Job's suffering. He knew that God did not need to dispense justice in accordance with human demands, but Elihu would benefit from the revelations of the Book of Job just as Job would. He recognized the inadequacy of traditional answers provided by the three friends. He represents the kind of pious thinking Job might have exhibited had he not been in such pain.

#### **D. Job's Confrontation with God**

Job's faith in God made him long to establish his innocence before him. Scholars understand Job 31 as an oath of innocence that served as a summons for an accuser, here God, to present evidence in court.<sup>10</sup> Job put himself under a curse if he had done any of the crimes that he recited. Such a challenge to an accuser implied that if the accuser did not come to court, then the accused was innocent. Yet Job did not force God to appear, since God did not have to answer Job. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge" (Jas. 4:12), and God could not exactly be a plaintiff in a case that he also judged. Job's desire was quixotic, yet God honored Job's faith by appearing to him, although in the power of the whirlwind (Job 38:1). Job had suffered terribly, and he represented all the righteous people on earth who undergo suffering that their own conduct does not deserve.

God verified to Job that his suffering was mysterious by not attempting to explain it. Rather he insinuated that if Job did not understand how all sorts of other things in the world worked, then he did not need to understand how it was that this suffering came to him. He implied that Job would be incapable of processing the reasons because he could not understand any of the other things God did that God asked him about. Basically, Job retracted his demand for God to justify his treatment of Job because he understood that he was not qualified to make such demands of God. God was so much greater than he was that he simply had to trust him in this area as he did,

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Brennan Dick, "The Legal Metaphor in Job 31," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (January 1979): 37-50; Edwin M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1990), 309-18; Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis*, trans. Charles A. Muenchow (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 97-99.

consciously or not, in all the rest of life that God created and controlled.<sup>11</sup>

God's technique might seem blustery as he asked Job to gird up his loins while he questioned him, but he respected Job too much to overlook such harsh words from him. God could have attacked Job for his bitter accusations, but he did not. He let him know that Job spoke ignorantly (38:2) and he asked Job to question himself about his behavior (40:2, 8). But most of his words allowed Job to turn his mind away from himself and the topics that had nearly driven him to despair. God's questions were like being taken away on a guided tour in a nature preserve or a weather laboratory. They were instructive and fascinating. They conveyed God's great interest, love, and involvement in every facet of his creation. One natural inference was that if God cared so much about the folds of flesh on a leviathan (41:23), or the time the deer give birth (39:2), then he would care deeply about Job's sufferings. If God hunted out prey so the lion would have enough to eat (38:39), then he would not let Job suffer needlessly.

God confirmed the wonderful descriptions Job had earlier given about God, stating the content of some of them in other terms.<sup>12</sup> God displayed a positive, constructive mind, gently teaching Job through question and observations. The Lord began by speaking of his counsel that governs the world. All his questions and observations concerned aspects of that counsel, and it was evident, especially by God's appearance to Job, that Job's suffering was part of that counsel. It doubtless received the same careful, marvelous attention that all the other aspects of God's counsel received. It was not some weird aberration, for apparently nothing in God's creation is without purpose, whether the foolishness of the ostrich (39:17) or the behemoth's penchant for lying under lotus plants (40:21). Job could trust that his sufferings fit into God's great plan.

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<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Huberman Scholnick, The Meaning of *Mišpāt* in the Book of Job, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101 (1982) 521-23, contends that Job incorrectly narrows the meaning of מִשְׁפָּט to "justice," while God stresses its regal aspect of "rule" or "sovereignty." However, though Job may have underestimated God's sovereignty, God uses מִשְׁפָּט in a judicial context (40:8), since other words in the sentence are "condemn" and "justify."

<sup>12</sup> For example: Job 9:4-10; 10:8-12; 12:7-25; 14:14-17; 19:25-27; 23:10; 24:22-24; 26:5-14; 27:7-23; 28:20-28; 29:2-6.

Why did God not simply explain to Job that his sufferings were due to a wager between God and Satan? Evidently that was another reality beyond human comprehension. To mention it would have been a half-truth. There is so much more involved in God's plan that this isolated fact probably would have been more misleading than comforting. To explain more fully God might have needed to speak about his Son's bearing undeserved suffering for the world's redemption, and it may have been too early in redemption history for such revelations about Christ. He could have explained that Job's sufferings would help to expose the error of a theology that prevented Job's contemporaries from loving each other and God the way God wanted. But that might have inflated Job with pride, and he already had a strong ego in demanding that God justify himself to him. Or he might not have been ready to accept such an answer with equanimity. God did not explicitly tell Job in what high esteem he held him either (1:8). There will be time for these things at the glorification of the saints (1 Cor. 4:5; 15:43).

#### **E. Retribution Theology Amended**

God has given a great deal of revelation since Job's time that helps to clarify why Job suffered. Jesus said that an innocent person could suffer so that God's work might be displayed in his life (John 9:3). The NT and especially 1 Peter give attention to the role and value of innocent suffering.<sup>13</sup> Innocent people suffer as sharers in Christ's suffering (1 Pet. 4:13). They suffer trials for the purification of their faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7), something Elihu realized (Job 33:14-18). They suffer for the comfort and salvation of others (2 Cor. 1:6; Col. 1:24). They may suffer as people who reflect the Spirit of God and of glory (1 Pet. 4:14). They may suffer because judgment begins with God's household (1 Pet. 4:17). They suffer because it is God's will (1 Pet. 3:17); Christians know that all things work together for good for them (Rom. 8:28). So they can have patience in suffering that is like Job's or even worse (Jas. 5:6, 11).

God was not trying to eliminate retribution theology by criticizing Job's three friends for their speech about him. They misapplied a basic truth in a particular situation. There is no doubt

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Pet. 1:11, 19; 2:4, 12, 19-24; 3:9, 14, 17-18; 4:1, 12-19; 5:1, 9-10.

that retribution is real. It is throughout the warp and woof of Scripture. We will be rewarded for righteousness and penalized for unrighteousness (Rom. 2:6-10). The apostle Paul warns that what we sow is what we will reap (Gal. 6:7). The friends were wrong to assume that retribution is the only divine principle at work in God's distribution of favorable and unfavorable circumstances. God has freedom and sovereignty to dispense such circumstances for other reasons as well.

The Book of Job affirms the principle of retribution when God restores Job's fortunes after appearing to him (Job 42). The apostle Peter taught that "it brings favor if, because of conscience toward God, someone endures grief from suffering unjustly" (1 Pet. 2:19 HCSB).<sup>14</sup> It was Job's right standing with God that made him a target of Satan. God gave Job double the wealth and livestock he had lost and replaced the sons and daughters who had died (Job 1:2-3; 42:10, 12-15). His life was more blessed after his suffering than it had been before (42:12). Retribution is an aspect of justice and grace, and God never meant to undermine that reality.

God does not necessarily exert prompt retribution because his plan is broader than that. If life dispensed immediate and absolute retribution, mankind would soon conform to correct patterns of behavior for self-preservation or reward. But it would not necessarily involve virtue or faith. Job's generation accepted the reality of evil but assumed that very soon it would have its proper retribution. Such a reality would tend to eliminate evil since humanity would quickly realize that it could not afford to make wrong choices. But Job's friends were insisting on a moral reality that the details of life do not uphold, as Job noticed (Job 21, 24).

David McKenna asserts that a world without evil would eradicate the possibility of human freedom and God's grace.<sup>15</sup> Evil is not immediately or sometimes ever punished in this life. While a principle of sowing and reaping does exist, it does not work with the prompt and rigid certainty demanded by the three friends' assumptions about God's justice. God gives human beings leeway to turn to him before judgment strikes. It was better for mankind to

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<sup>14</sup> HCSB signifies *Holman Christian Standard Bible*.

<sup>15</sup> David McKenna, *Job*, *The Communicator's Commentary* (Waco: Word, 1986), 305.



recognize these facts, even if it undermined pat assumptions about God's justice.

Perhaps false beliefs about God's justice were easier than frank admission that human beings cannot fully understand God's will. Job struck at the myth that bad circumstances inevitably signal divine punishment. His own case exposed the fact that God does not always bring suffering because of sin. Such theological assumptions shielded Job's society from the reality of a God who acts incomprehensibly. Nevertheless, God desires that we freely trust him (Heb. 11:6), and he has revealed himself sufficiently so we can.<sup>16</sup> God insists that we must trust him because we cannot now understand what he does. Job took the right path, even if he slightly stumbled.

God came to Job to drive home the innumerable ways that he superintends our world in a manner we cannot understand. His gracious appearance to Job and the facts he shared revealed him as a God who cares deeply about people. Job had the rare human experience of seeing God and speaking with him face to face. God more than justified Job's fundamental faith in him. The outcome of the theophany and Job's restoration taught that God is "very compassionate and merciful" (Jas. 5:11). Yet we cannot understand his ways, they are not predictable, and they are not always what we would want.

But we are not what he wants us to be, since we are sinful in a world corrupted by sin. Job's society agreed that mankind is sinful (e.g., Eliphaz: 4:17-19; 15:14-16; Job: 9:2; Bildad: 25:4-6; Elihu: 33:8-18). God is working to change mankind, and His plan sometimes runs contrary to what people think is right. God emphasized the uncoerced nature of his appearance to Job by not explaining his plan. An explanation was evidently inappropriate at that time, despite Job's wishes. But people needed to be able to love one another and God, something difficult to accomplish under their misconceptions about human suffering and God's justice. God acted sovereignly to undermine these misconceptions, allowing Satan to ransack a righteous man's life as part of the process. If God had to justify his reasoning to erring humanity before or after taking such a step, if he were not absolutely free to do such things, perhaps

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<sup>16</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* 174.

humanity would still be laboring under the false theology that was so harmful in Job's day.

### Conclusion

An initial trajectory behind this study was investigation of how God's sovereignty in Job could rebut the claims of Bart Ehrman's book *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*.<sup>17</sup> Ehrman refers to Job, but the Book of Job suggests that it is not our place to demand such a detailed answer from God as Job wanted to obtain (Job 31:35). David Brooks notes that when God appeared to Job, it was God who did the questioning, not Job (38:3; 40:7).<sup>18</sup>

What seems clear is that the sufferings of Job and those around him were part of a benevolent divine purpose. God revealed himself to Job as a purposeful, caring God. Trials purified Job's faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7), and insofar as they were part of the life of Job's society, they may have purified the faith of that society. As for Job's children who died, whether they knew it or not, they committed their spirits into God's hands (Lk. 23:36; Eccl. 12:7), and it is premature to judge the outcome of that (1 Cor. 4:5). One purpose for God's testing human faith is to produce "endurance" (Jas. 1:3), and Job is famous for his "endurance" (Jas. 5:11). He learned that no matter what happened he should trust God with a deep recognition that God had a reason for allowing it, despite his incomprehension of the reason.

The NT confirms this benevolent divine purpose behind believers' suffering. The HCSB translates Rom. 8:17: "and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ—seeing that we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." Many translations handle "seeing that" as "if indeed" (e.g., NIV, NET, NASB, NKJV),<sup>19</sup> but whatever the exact nuance Paul intended, suffering is a necessary precondition for glorification.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> David L. Brooks, professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Criswell College, at a southwest regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, March 27, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> NET = New English Translation; NASB = New American Standard Bible; NKJV = New King James Version.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek term (εἴπερ) can mean "since" or "seeing that." It is a variant of the standard Greek word for "if" (εἰ), which can also imply "since" and does so at the beginning of the verse. For the previous verse, Rom. 8:16, asserts: "The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are [Footnote continued on next page ... ]"

In a fallen world, God determined that suffering would be inevitable (Rom. 8:20-21; Gen. 3:16-19). Both Christ and his apostles had to suffer (Acts 17:3; 9:16). God granted the Church to suffer as he granted that Job should suffer (Phil. 1:29). God uses suffering for the ultimate good of his children (cf. Rom. 8:28). His goal is to conform them to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29), and that transformation not only happens at the end of the age but also now: “We all, with unveiled faces, are reflecting the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18 HCSB). Life with its difficulties is how God brings these glorious changes in his people, even though we cannot fully understand the process.