

Job and the Problem of Evil: Some Thoughts

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I.

Is it at all reasonable to believe in a God of love in the face of all the evils of life?

This question, for me, is where the rubber hits the road in any theological reflection. If we can't answer it plausibly, honestly, ethically, our faith becomes fantastical; more a form of escapism than faith.

I've spent a lot of time with this question, so I thought I'd share some of my ponderings.

Of course, it's nice to believe in a loving God, and, for some, such niceness alone may seem justification enough for belief. Maybe it's even necessary to think this—or something like this—for ultimate peace of mind.

But the idea has its problems. How do we reconcile it with the great evils we encounter in life? What of the Holocaust, child molestation, cancer, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, birth defects, Alzheimer's. . . and on and on?

Where was this loving God during hurricane Katrina, when elderly men and women drowned to death in the flood waters. Where was he in Auschwitz? Where is he in the middle of the night when a cancerous child cries out in anguish and pain?

The religions twist themselves into pretzels trying to answer this question. In order to preserve the idea of God's goodness some interpret evil itself as good. Some Rabbis, for instance, have gone so far as to blame the Holocaust on Jewish failure to abide by the laws of the Torah; the Holocaust was God's just punishment for Jewish disobedience.

Augustine applies a similar logic to the whole of human misery. Adam and Eve ate a piece of fruit after God told them not to. For this, the whole of the human race is (justly) deserving of every imaginable horror (and even some unimaginable ones). It's justice.

We can put this theology into the form of a simple syllogism:

All evil is justice.
All justice is good.
Therefore, all evil is good.

That's the logic.

With this logic God is spared the charge of unjustifiably allowing evil. But at what price? We make ourselves stupid trying not to notice how perverse such thinking is. We blame the victims. We blame ourselves. We quite intentionally turn our backs on the downtrodden and suffering so

as not to have to wonder why God would allow their misery. We proclaim a ‘prosperity gospel’—the prosperous deserve their prosperity and the miserable their misery. How do we know? Well, because the prosperous are prosperous and the miserable miserable, *hence*, that’s how God has ordained it!

With this we turn Jesus’ gospel on its head.

Is there an honest and reasonable way to preserve the idea of a good God in the face of the evils of the world?

That’s the question.

II.

The biblical book of Job is remarkable in that it tackles the question of God and evil head on.

Job is presented as an extraordinarily pious and righteous man. In spite of this, all his worldly goods—his wealth, his health, his family—are destroyed. At first he accepts his losses with equanimity: “The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” But finally he can’t take it anymore. In anguish, he rages against the injustices of God.

His pious friends show up to comfort him. They deliver him an ‘Augustinian’ message: He must have done something to deserve what has happened to him. He is being justly punished.

But one of the more remarkable things about the book of Job is that it rejects this idea. We know—the prologue has already told us—that his friends are wrong. Job isn’t being punished at all, he is being ‘tested.’ His suffering is a test of faith.

But this itself is a strange idea. What need is there for a *test* of faith? Why must he prove it? And faith in what? Not God’s existence; Job never once doubts this. What then? Faith in God’s goodness? But how is God’s goodness to be affirmed in the face of a world that subjects us to so many cruelties?

I suppose that’s the ‘test’ question.

In the end, God appears to Job and overwhelms him with a vision of divine grandeur that silences him. Job relents. He withdraws his protests and criticisms. He is reconciled, or so it seems.

Has he answered the test question? How?

On one reading, God has simply intimidated Job into submission. Job’s silence is fear. God has bullied him into a retreat. But this is a singularly unsatisfying conclusion. Nothing is resolved. We do not learn the answer to the test question (and suspect there is none).

But there is another reading. On this reading, Job *sees* something that makes him relent, some truth he hadn't seen before. It is not his fear that stops him but this new truth.

What is it? What does he see? Is there anything *to* see?

That's the next question.

III.

At the heart of the book of Job is the question: What is holy?

Webster's dictionary defines holiness as: "worthy of complete devotion."

This definition is an echo of the Torah's injunction: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

But why should we? What is it about God that makes God "worthy of complete devotion"?

Is it that God protects us and benefits us (so long as we're good)? Is this what lies at the heart of God's worthiness?

This is what the book of Job calls into question. It is called into question as well by our own observation of the evils of life.

It doesn't seem God can always be counted on to protect us and benefit us, even the best of us (maybe especially the best of us; e.g., Jesus, MLK, etc.).

Does this make God no longer worthy of worship? A God not worthy of worship would scarcely be God. So if this makes God no longer worthy of worship this is as much as to say that there is no God.

Or is there still something worthy of worship that Job sees at the end of the book, something independent of God's power to protect and benefit?

If so, what might it be?

IV.

What is deserving of our highest devotion?

This is the question at the heart of the book of Job.

The book begins with a debate over this question between Satan and God.

God boasts to Satan, “Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him: a man of perfect integrity, who fears God and avoids evil.”

But Satan isn't impressed. ‘Strip him of his worldly goods,’ says Satan, ‘and he will curse you to your face.’

Satan's claim is that no one can be fully and finally devoted to the life of perfect integrity touted by God. When push comes to shove, devotion to worldly goods will, must, and should trump all.

Even Job, Satan claims, can only maintain his commitment to perfect integrity so long as it ‘pays’ in worldly goods.

They propose a test: Take all of Job's goods away from him and see if his integrity remains.

This they do.

Does Job pass the test?

The answer, I believe, is yes. Job never abandons his commitment to perfect integrity. His complaint, his protest, his outrage, is over his feeling that *God* has failed the test. God has abandoned God's commitment to ‘perfect integrity,’ to justice.

God has failed to live up to God's part of the bargain, which is to protect and sustain those who live lives of perfect integrity.

And behind this mythological story, of course, is a very real question:

Given that God fails the test, given that even the best people (perhaps especially the best people) are subject to devastating suffering and loss, given that nice guys finish last (if only because they are so easily taken advantage of by the not-so-nice-guys), does it still make sense to devote oneself to a life of ‘perfect integrity’?

That's the question at the heart of the book of Job.

What's the answer?

Who wins the debate: God or Satan?

V.

The innovation of the Bible is its overt coupling of morality with divine power.

The pagan gods largely represented the forces of nature, or, more broadly, the forces governing the worldly goods required for material security and happiness. One worshiped them to procure these goods.

This idea gets transferred to the biblical God, with the difference that the principal way of worshipping this God is through living an ethical life.

Live an ethical and pious life and God will reward you with worldly goods. That's the bargain.

But it turns out that this cannot always be counted on to work; a problem that is the theme of the book of Job. God does not always hold up God's part of the bargain, or so it seems.

But what exactly is the bargain? If one behaves ethically merely for the sake of gaining a material reward, has one in fact behaved ethically?

Is it God's demand that humans merely *behave* ethically or that they *be* ethical?

Is the ethical life to be lived merely as a means to the end of material benefit, or as a supreme good in itself?

At the beginning of the book of Job, Satan implicitly denies that the latter is even possible: The nature of life is such, says Satan, that when push comes to shove humans must and will prioritize worldly goods over justice.

In this, Satan is challenging the premise of biblical religion as such.

So God calls Satan's attention to Job, as one whose exceptional righteousness proves otherwise.

They agree to put Job to the test: Will his devotion to this ethical God fail when it no longer results in worldly benefits; indeed, when all worldly goods are stripped away?

At stake is the question: Is there anything higher to devote ourselves to than the acquisition of worldly goods?

Suppose we answer no, then this would seem to license every form of exploitation--cheating, lying, stealing, killing--for the sake of securing these goods.

Suppose we answer yes, then this leads to the question: What is this higher thing, and why should we be willing to give up so much for it?

VI.

God finally appears to Job "out of the whirlwind," in response to Job's charge that God is unjust.

Two answers are given Job.

First, it is implicitly acknowledged that the world cannot always be counted upon to be just.

Why not? We're not told. The implication is that the nature of the creation itself—or, as we might say, the metaphysics of the creation—does not allow for it. Perhaps we would need a course in divine physics, or metaphysics, to know precisely why. God doesn't provide such a course for Job (nor for us). God says to Job, in effect, "You can't understand and must accept."

But there is a second answer given Job that is not spoken, but that we surmise from Job's response to his vision of God.

Job's soul is brought to peace through this vision.

Why? What does he see that allows for this?

We can only surmise, but it seems that a shift takes place within Job, a shift from seeing himself as rooted in the world, with all its hardship, uncertainty, and injustice, to seeing himself as rooted in the God who transcends the world, whose fundamental being is not subject to the contingencies and vicissitudes of worldly existence.

In other words, prior to his vision, Job sees his own primary good as dependent upon worldly goods, and sees worship of God as the rightful means to securing such worldly goods.

After his vision, Job sees his primary good as rooted in God, beyond the vicissitudes of worldly life, which allows him to accept these vicissitudes with a new equanimity.

This shift—the possibility of this shift—is the Bible's final answer to the problem of evil.

It is an answer that might be expressed thus: Though the world will always be subject to generation and decay, birth and death, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, random acts of both kindness and cruelty, there is an Eternal Good that transcends the world, in which the world itself is based. This Eternal Good is not subject to the vicissitudes, the ups and downs, of worldly life. Through communion with it, the soul finds its true peace.

Such peace is not a *reward* for righteous living granted by an overseer God, but is the consequence of the soul's recognition of its embeddedness within the Eternal Good that embraces all, a recognition that entails, as an integral element, the disposition toward self and other the Bible calls 'righteousness,' 'justice,' and 'love,' as one comes to see one's unity with all that is.

The injunction to seek such communion can be found at the heart of the Hebrew Bible, in the central command of the Torah: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

Indeed, one can find this basic idea at the heart of all the world's great religions. One who has arrived at communion with the Eternal Good will still be subject to the generation and decay, birth and death, good and evil of worldly life, but will no longer be entrapped in it.

This is Job's answer to the problem of evil.