

Job: Servant of *Yahweh*/Prophet of *Allah*

By Barbara B. Pemberton^{*}

Suffering is a universal human phenomenon. In a time when religious differences are evident and often fuel conflict, shared narratives may provide common ground in which true understanding may take root. This paper will consider the problem of suffering and address how adherents of the three great monotheistic traditions seek understanding, comfort, and the believer's appropriate response from the same story found within their respective sacred texts: the story of Job, the servant of Yahweh in the Tanakh/Old Testament of Judaism and Christianity—known as Ayyub, prophet of Allah, in the Qur'an. The story of Job addresses more than the distribution of evil problem. At stake in the story is Job's very relationship to his God. This paper will consider a few of the many Jewish, Christian, and Islamic insights from the ancient story, hopefully leading to mutual understanding and empathy.

Keywords: *suffering, Tanakh, Qur'an, Job, Ayyub*

Introduction

In a time when religious differences help fuel conflict worldwide, shared narratives often provide common ground in which true understanding may take root. This paper will consider the all too common problem of suffering and address how adherents of the three great monotheistic religions seek understanding and the believer's appropriate response from the same story found within their respective sacred texts. Most scholars from each of these three traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—consider the writings of the *Tanakh*/Old Testament to at least contain divine revelation. While they may not agree on the extent of the revelation or the method of its delivery, they do share stories as well as a common desire to glean God's message for God's people from the pages of the text. One such shared story is that of Job, the servant of *Yahweh*—called *Ayyub*, prophet of *Allah*, in the *Qur'an*. Job is described as a pious, righteous man who loses everything—family, possessions, and health—when his faith is tested. In the biblical account, three friends come to console him. Through it all Job remains faithful to his God who rewards him by restoring all that was lost. All three hermeneutic communities consider Job to be an archetype of human response to suffering, regarding Job's response to his situation as exemplary. The story of Job addresses more than the distribution of evil problem. At stake in the story is Job's very relationship to his God. This paper will consider a few of the many Jewish, Christian, and Islamic insights from the ancient story, in hopes adherents within each tradition will use it to better understand the other faiths' approach to suffering.

^{*}Professor, Ouachita Baptist University, USA.

Textual Considerations

Some exegetes believe that Job was adapted into the Jewish milieu by a gifted redactor who used the original ancient tale as the “frame” for the biblical account (Job chapters 1, 2 and 4:7-17) and enlarged the story with the complex center section of poetic dialogues creating a complex work with numerous possible interpretations. Within the poetic center Job goes so far as to question God. Muslims only embrace the biblical Job of the narrative frame as further identified through the *Qur'an* and the prophetic traditions¹ considering the center section an errant human addition as it is not representative of a true prophet of Islam. The qur'anic injunction against questioning God also renders the center theologically suspect.² Christians also draw various responses from the story of Job. While many believers may agree with the Islamic perspective of God's ultimate sovereignty, others would join their Jewish neighbors in questioning God, not anticipating answers but rather an awareness of his presence—peace and hope becoming a reality experienced through the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit.

Islamic Story

In the Islamic traditional account Job³ was a prophet, a descendant of Esau, a tall man with beautiful eyes and brittle hair. As a prophet, Job received special guidance and inspiration to preach monotheism to the people of his land in the north-east corner of Arabia. He led prayers in his mosque every night and was active in his community caring for widows, orphans, guests, and strangers. Even God acknowledged Job as a righteous Muslim and blessed him just as He rewarded other prophets including Noah, Solomon, Joseph, and Moses. His wealth included a large family, vast herds of animals, many servants, and a fine reputation in the community. By the time Job was seventy, *Iblis*, or Satan, had grown so

¹Here the prophetic traditions (*sunna*) refers to the *hadith* and consists of Muhammad's actions and sayings, forming a second trustworthy foundational source of Islam. This is not to be confused with “tradition” as reference to the whole of Islamic heritage. Job appears in three passages in the *Qur'an* with further identification included in the prophetic traditions. That he appears as a prophet at all out of the, according to some sources 20,000 prophets of Islam, is noteworthy, but he is by no means a major prophet. Islamic scholars believe the Old and New Testaments have retained some correct expressions of God's original guidance given through earlier prophets but consider the texts obscured by human additions and alterations. The *Qur'an* in its original revelatory Arabic is held as the corrective and verbatim final word from God preserved for all humanity.

²Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, interview by author, 24 June 1998. Dr. Haddad is a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amhurst, and a prolific writer in the area of Islam in America.

³For this account I have blended the information from all available sources including: Ali 1983; the prophetic traditions as given on the prophet Ayyub in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1960; and Gibb and Kramers (1995). I tried to avoid the areas of disagreement in interpretation of the story such as the variance in the number of children restored to Job and how the new children were acquired, such as by the same wife made young again or by resurrection on his first children, etc.

envious of Job's piety that he asked God for the opportunity to put Job to a test.⁴ Since Job had become prideful of his own piety God decided that it was time for a lesson⁵ and so God allowed Satan to test Job first in the areas of his wealth and his family. When Job remained steadfast in his trust and obedience to God in spite of losing everything he had—including all of his children—God allowed Satan to strike Job physically with the exception of his tongue, heart, and intellect. Satan inflamed Job's body and filled it with worms by breathing into his nose. Job's diseased flesh became so foul that not even his wife could stand the smell, so Job moved out of town to live on the dunghill. Job cried out: "the Evil One has afflicted me with distress and suffering!" (*The Qur'an* Sad 38:41).

Job became quite disturbed and cursed the day of his birth. Friends came to Job but they provided no comfort at all and Job became more mentally imbalanced. At last Satan decided to test Job through his wife, *Rahma*, just as he had tested Adam through Eve. Job stood firm and vowed to beat his wife with a hundred blows for being an accomplice of the Evil One. Throughout even the worst of his suffering Job remained patient and steadfast in faith. God reminded Job of his mercy and Job regained his humility, proclaiming to God: "Truly distress has seized me, but Thou art the Most Merciful of those that are Merciful" (*The Qur'an* Hud 11:83). Job defeated evil with his virtues of humility, patience, and faith in God. He almost lost his mind, but never his faith. Satan declared defeat and God sent the angel *Djabra'il*, or Gabriel, to instruct Job to stomp the ground to receive restoration. Job obeyed and miraculously a spring of refreshing water bubbled up to provide healing along with physical and spiritual refreshment. God also returned to Job his friends and family, including brethren, seven sons, and three beautiful daughters, and all his wealth—double in number as a grace to be remembered by all believers. God asked Job to prove his gentleness and humility by fulfilling his vow concerning his wife with only a wisp of grass. Job lived to enjoy his descendants to the fourth generation. God says of Job: "Truly We found him full of patience and constancy. How excellent in Our service! Ever did he turn (to Us)!" (*The Qur'an* Sad 38:44). At the Final Judgment Job will stand as an example to all who would offer illness as an excuse for negligence in their religious obligations and will lead those who patiently endured to Paradise.

⁴*Iblis* is the personal name of the devil also known from biblical accounts. The *Qur'an* identifies *Iblis* as an angel and as a *djinni* which is problematic for angels are said to always be obedient and the *djinni*, in exercising free will, are often disobedient. Until *Iblis* meets his ultimate end in hell-fire at the end of time, he works to lead humans astray.

⁵This reason for God's allowing Satan to strike Job is not from the prophetic traditions but is rather the most widely held explanation from the exegetical tradition of Islam.

Jewish and Christian Story

The biblical narrative account of the story contains some details, but not to the extent of the Islamic traditions. Some scholars have concluded that Job was a wealthy, perhaps royal, Edomite known even to God as righteous. In this version, the satan, or “adversary,” questioned God concerning the genuineness of human faith: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9)—a question of selfless love and devotion. God allowed the satan afflict Job by taking away his wealth, servants, children, and ultimately his health, but through it all Job retained his integrity. “Shall we not accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10) His wife, however, said to him, “Curse God and die.” (Job 2:9) Three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, did a poor job of consolation and Job became increasingly more distraught. They offered a classical deuteronomic theology arguing that such suffering is a clear indication that Job must not be righteous, trying to get Job to admit he has sinned. When they failed, a young man, Elihu, entered into the argument defending God and insisting that Job’s suffering was to discipline and teach him a lesson. While legitimate in many cases, all these arguments were moot because Job was declared innocent by God Himself. Job did reach a point when he questioned God’s justice – why had God not defended him? (Job 14: 23). In the end, Job experienced God relationally saying “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” (Job 42:5) God even validated Job’s questioning (Job 42:7-8) and restored to Job double all that he had lost. Job 42:12 explains “The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first.” Job lived a hundred and forty years having seen his children and their children “to the fourth generation.” (Job 42:16).

Issues

Throughout recorded history humankind has asked questions suggested by this story. A first reading of both the biblical narrative frame (excluding the dialogues of the center) and the Islamic traditional account delivers a model of patience and faithful endurance through suffering even without the complexities of the poetic dialogues. However, even the simple tale is problematic. The God of this story appears to have been duped by Satan into mistreating the innocent Job, an exposure that robs God of wisdom and goodness. In return, Job’s obsequious response seems too naïve and unrealistic (Penchansky 1990, pp. 36-37). Can a realistic, satisfactory relationship between God and Job, and therefore God and anyone, be established taking these two actors into account?

The poetic center is also problematic. Bible scholar David Penchansky has noted the dissonance between the frame and the center that arises from contrast in the characterizations of both Job and God. The patient pious Job of the frame becomes the impatient blasphemous Job of the center who questions why God has treated him so wickedly; the insecure God of the frame becomes the majestic God of the center (Penchansky 1990, p. 28). Current biblical scholarship emphasizes the

study of the center and tends to ignore the frame, while popular reading most often ignores the center and focuses on the frame (Penchansky 1990, p. 28).

Problem of Innocent Suffering – Perspectives from the Muslim Tradition

Traditionally the first question asked by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike is: why did God allow this innocent servant to be tested? Can God be trusted? Why Job? This is usually followed by the next question: how then should Job, the believing individual, respond?

The Muslim exegetical consensus gives God a reason for the test: Job's self-righteousness. Within the Islamic mind-set God has every right to do this and, furthermore, it should not be questioned.⁶ This Islamic response is unmistakably informed by the identification of Job as a prophet which by definition designates his life as exemplary. As a prophet Job would have been totally submitted to the will of God and extraordinarily righteous and committed to his task. Job would have been exemplarily "Muslim" in relating to God.

Within the Islamic relational frame-work the Muslim understands one's creatureliness and dependence on God positionally as that of slave of God. The believer is "one with whom God does as He pleases because he belongs to Him, who is totally at His disposal and in a state of utter dependence and humility before Him." (Haneef 1996, p. 71)⁷ This is reflected in the term "Islam" itself which means the attainment of inner and outer peace by the loving and total submission of one's conscious self to the will of God (Badawi 1988, p. 2). The Muslim accepts all of life as a test that naturally includes trouble and illness which are to be experienced with the "beautiful patience" exemplified by Job (*The Qur'an* The Ways of Ascent 70:5). Every experience is to be seen as ultimately for the good of the believer, a hopeful soul-making theodicy, and therefore a Muslim should not complain. The extraordinary submission that the prophet Job would have demonstrated is also reinforced by the later qur'anic injunction against questioning God or his actions.

Many contemporary Muslims say that recognition of God's complete control over all benefit and harm is a great source of peace and confidence for everything is in the Hands of God—the All-Wise, the Most-Merciful. Rather than reliance on what some people would call fate, the notion of a Muslim's trust and relationship with God does include personal effort; Muslims are encouraged to do their best in all they do because one's destiny has not been discovered until all possibilities have been explored. Muslims understand that God in some way allows humanity to make certain choices, including the opportunity to choose to follow God's guidance and thereby escape the control of random, chaotic desires (Haneef 1996, p. 13). Believers should strive to act according to God's guidance knowing that the

⁶Haddad.

⁷Twentieth century reformed Islamic thought, in an attempt to move the responsibility for actions onto humanity has shifted the focus from individual as slave to the notion of the human as God's *khalifah*, or vice-regent on earth, as a foundation for revolution. Therefore, if one experiences evil it is one's own fault for having misunderstood God's guidance or disobeyed. Haddad.

results are left to the sovereignty of God; and since an individual's nature and capacities are given by God, it can be understood that nothing happens outside of God's control. Ultimately, Muslims are exhorted to accept whatever is sent their way with patience and trust. This common contemporary understanding is often summed up in the phrase "Whatever God wills" or "if god wills" (*inshallah*).⁸ Since God is all-wise and loving he can be trusted to have only good motives and purposes for all that happens. The prophets witness: "No reason have we why we should not put our trust on God. Indeed He has guided us to the Ways we (follow). We shall certainly bear with patience all the hurt you may cause us. For those who put their trust should put their trust on God" (*The Qur'an* Hud14:12).

In his work *Midaq Alley*, Egyptian Nobel laureate, Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006) tells the story of a simple, pious man in Cairo preparing for pilgrimage to Mecca. Radwan Hussainy had lost a young son but not his faith, reasons for which he expresses passionately to his neighbors (Mahfouz in Kessler (2000, pp. 515–517):

I love life in all its colors and sounds, its nights and days, joys and sorrows, beginnings and ends. I love all things living and moving and still. It is all pure goodness. Evil is no more than the inability of the sick to see the good concealed in the crevices.

God does nothing that is not wise, and wisdom is good. My Lord wished well of both me and the child. A feeling of joy overcame me when I realized that His wisdom was greater than my sorrow. I told myself: O God, You have brought affliction upon me and put me to the test. I have come through the test with my faith still firm, certain of Your wisdom. Thank You, O God.

It has since been my practice that whenever anything afflicts me, I express my joyful thanks from the bottom of my heart. Why should I not do so?

Jewish Perspectives

While there are people from many traditions who would agree with the Islamic interpretation, others may join Jewish thinkers in focusing on the relationship that is drawn out of the center—from a Job who not only questions but blasphemes, and from a God who responds not with answers but with a theophany and affirms Job's righteousness in seeking God. One may even conclude that the center goes so far as to put God on trial—actually risking the integrity of Yahweh himself. Through this picture of Job the reader is also invited to question God boldly in the midst of any circumstance—a freedom exercised only within the security of a close personal relationship.⁹ Traditionally, ultimate suffering from the Jewish perspective is distance, separation, exile, from God. Wrestling with God is to again experience God, however God may be defined, individually, or better, corporately.

⁸Haddad.

⁹Randall O'Brien, lecture 23 June 1998.

In his work *I and Thou*, Jewish educator and philosopher, Martin Buber (1878-1965) combined the spiritual depth of Hasidism with existential philosophy. “Buber argued that open, nonmanipulative, personal, and mutually affirming dialogue not only improves relationships but also reveals God, the ‘Eternal Thou.’” (Kessler 2000, p. 388). According to Buber, the very history of Judaism consists of a dialogue between God and humankind. Articulating this dialogical relationship in *On Judaism* he states: “The basic teaching that fills the Hebrew Bible is that our life is a dialogue between the above and the below.” (Buber in Kessler 2000, p. 388). Buber continues (Buber in Kessler 2000, p. 392):

How about Job himself? He not only laments, but he charges that the ‘cruel’ God (30:21) has ‘removed his right’ from him (27:2) and thus that the judge of all the earth acts against justice. And he receives an answer from God. But what God says to him does not answer the charge; it does not even touch upon it. The true answer that Job receives is God’s appearance only, only this: that distance turns to nearness, that ‘his eye sees Him’ (42:5), that he knows Him again. Nothing is explained, nothing is adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness. Nothing has happened but that man again hears God’s address.

. . . even now we contend, we too, with God, even with Him, the Lord of being, whom we once, we here, chose for our Lord. We do not put up with earthly being; we struggle for its redemption, and struggling we appeal to the help of our Lord, who is again and still a hiding one. In such a state we await His voice, whether it comes out of the storm or out of a stillness that follows it.

Elie Wiesel writes: . . .

I was told that to be a Jew means to place the accent simultaneously and equally on verb and noun, on the secular and the eternal, to prevent the one from excluding the other or succeeding at the expense of the other. That it means to serve God by espousing man’s cause, to plead from man while recognizing his need of God. And to opt for the Creator *and* his creation, refusing to pit one against the other. Of course, man must interrogate God, as did Abraham; articulate his anger, as did Moses; and shout his sorrow, as did Job. But only the Jew opts for Abraham—who questions—*and* for God—who is questioned. He claims every role and assumes every destiny; he is both sum and synthesis.”

I shall long, perhaps forever, remember my Master, the one with the yellowish beard, telling me, ‘Only the Jew knows that he may oppose God as long as he does so in defense of His creation.’ (Kessler 2000, p. 394)

Emil Fackenheim, following Buber, concludes that humans cannot comprehend, much less pass judgment on God—the relationship between finite humankind and the infinite God being the ultimate paradox. The ways of God remain mysteries to humans who must live with the tension between responsibility toward God on the one hand and safety in him on the other (Fackenheim 1968, p.

48). Fackenheim offers the rich Jewish tradition of Midrash¹⁰ as a means of facing what he refers to as “dialectical contradictions” such as divine transcendence vs. divine involvement in time, and divine power vs. human freedom. The Midrash depicts God and humankind as partners, leaving unsolved the problems of the divine-human relationship. He writes (Fackenheim 1978, p. 262):

Philosophical reflection may find it necessary to chose between a God who is divine only if He is omnibenevolent and omnipotent, and a world which is truly world because it contains elements contradicting these divine elements, namely evil and human freedom. Midrash recognizes the tension yet refuses to choose.

Christian Perspectives

As with other traditions, various responses to suffering are drawn from the story of Job by Christians. And while some readers may agree with the Islamic perspective of God’s sovereignty, many Christians would join their Jewish neighbors in questioning God, feeling that God desires to hear from his children. Many Christians would also agree that rather than answers concerning specific occurrences of suffering, God typically responds with an awareness of his presence—peace and hope becoming a reality experienced through the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit.

Why does God allow suffering? Christian responses are similar to those of other faiths. The “soul-building” model argues that God has a lesson in godliness to be learned through each situation. The eschatological argument suggests that all suffering, though a horrible mystery, is really small in light of eternity and that ultimately everything will be made clear and sorted out in the next life.

Another explanation offered is the “freewill” view which argues that God so desired fellowship with his creatures that, rather than create puppets, he created humankind with freewill so they could freely choose to love him. In creating freewill God also created the possibility of evil, which was actualized by humans. Not only humankind fell, but the world with it and from this fall has sprung all manner of suffering.

There has been a stir in contemporary Christian scholarship concerning the issue of God’s sovereignty and human freewill. Gregory Boyd argues that in creating a free world God allowed the existence of powerful, but not omnipotent, opposition to his will. He writes in *God at War* that in Job “*Satan* is calling into question Yahweh’s wisdom in the way he orders his creation. It is not Job who is on trial here, but God . . . Job is the unfortunate victim of the unjust ‘accuser’ who has raised his hand against the Almighty.” Satan appears “semi-independent” of God and a source of evil. Yahweh’s response is not to defend his right to “inflict evil on people indiscriminately.” “The thrust of his speeches to Job is rather to drive home the point—the point of the entire epic poem—that neither Job nor his ‘friends’ are in a position to understand the goings-on of the vast cosmos Yahweh has created.” Boyd continues that “Yahweh’s character is set against evil” and the

¹⁰An interpretation of scripture.

cosmic forces of destruction. He argues, “There are forces of chaos (to say nothing of the satan) to contend with.” (Boyd 1997, pp. 147-148).

Boyd writes that the answer offered by the book of Job as to why evil happens “is decisively not that it is the will of God. Evil is a mystery, but it is not a mystery concerning Yahweh’s character. It is rather the mystery of what goes on . . . in ‘the great assembly’ and in an incomprehensibly vast cosmos threatened by cosmic forces. In other words, the mystery of evil is located not in the heart of God but in the heart of humanity and in the hidden world between humans and God.” (Boyd 1997, p. 149)¹¹. Boyd (1997, pp. 164-166) continues:

The central point of the entire epic is that neither Job’s friends nor Job himself are correct in their explanations of his misfortunes. Job’s sorry plight was neither punishment for his (supposed) sin nor part of some wise, righteous and judgmental divine plan, as his friends insisted. But it was also not the result of an arbitrary irrational streak in God, as Job (and contemporary ‘demonic-in-Yahweh’ theorists) suspected. Rather, the point of the book is to say that these are not the only two options . . . there is much more to this cosmos than just us and God. . . . [T]here is also an incredibly vast, magnificent, complex and often times warring and hostile ‘world in between’ that we must factor in. . . . It is because of our near total ignorance—not on the basis of his sheer divine authority—that Yahweh instructs Job and his friends to remain silent in the face of evil. It is, in the end, neither God’s fault nor Job’s fault.

He concludes that “One of the primary reasons why the problem of evil is so intellectually intractable for us is precisely that we have not learned the lesson of Job. . . . We have not moved beyond the false dichotomy of Job and his friends: evil in our culture is still generally seen as being either our fault or God’s will, or both. We are yet caught in an Augustinian, classical-philosophical model of God’s providence and an Enlightenment model of our aloneness in the cosmos.” (Boyd 1997, p. 166). For Boyd, many questions remain but “. . . the Bible attributes the responsibility for evil to forces that are hostile to God—especially to Satan—not to God himself.” (Boyd 1997, p. 166).

The Job of the center can also be read as offering another hope—hints of yet another type of relationship with the creator—a relationship with God made available through a mediator, a redeemer (*go’el* in Hebrew) to vindicate him. Job, the Gentile prophet, proclaims this veiled promise: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-7) Christians ultimately rely on Christ as redeemer. In the cross even, God acted to redeem creation—initiating a new and lasting relationship with humanity to whom free-will has been given so that individuals may respond in faith. To these

¹¹Without undermining the sovereignty of God, the Bible generally portrays the cosmos as more like a divinely governed democracy than a divinely controlled dictatorship, and this democracy encompasses, but greatly transcends, free human beings. But the book of Job and the entire Bible also assume that we know next to nothing about the goings on of this “world in between.”

believers, the cross settles forever, regardless of the circumstances, the question of God's love for all people.¹²

From a Christian perspective, God is understood, therefore, to respond to the questions of evil and suffering not by answering objections, or by exempting believers from pain, but through Christ's identification with creation, and His own redemptive suffering. God has proven to be trustworthy by defeating evil on the cross and thereby delivering humanity (and creation) forever from ultimate evil. In this life most Christians trust God to be an ever-present friend and not an enemy.

Conclusion

In summary, the traditional Islamic interpretation of the story affirms Job's response to God as an exemplarily obedient, submissive servant of God to whom no explanation is due. Contemporary Muslims find hope in a soul-making theodicy in light of sure judgment for all. Rejecting the "Job of the center," the believer may trust the all-compassionate God and needs not question.

Embracing the center, Jews find strength in an encounter with God through dialogue—even wrestling with God. Christians join with Jews embracing the center and talking honestly with God. Adding a hope firmly rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ, Christians ultimate rest in the ministering presence of God's indwelling Holy Spirit.

Other lessons can be drawn from the ancient story. Suffering can come unexpectedly to anyone. From the center poetic center we learn to be slow to judge another's actions. Matthew 7:1 say "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." Be careful not cause innocent suffering, but do what you can to help those who do. Mafouz (p. 517) offers: "Cannot a good man unknowingly be an accomplice of the devil by keeping to himself?"

While no faith community claims to have all the answers to the questions of evil and suffering in this life, each of the three great monotheistic traditions finds within the ancient story of Job a model for a believer's relationship with God. The challenge for each tradition is the test of that faith in the crucible of human experience.

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¹²While Christians include in the description of this new relationship the role of the slave: "you are not your own; you were bought at a price" (I Corinthians 6:19-20), other passages indicate a family relationship: being adopted into God's family, becoming part of the body of Christ, being born again.

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