

**FROM CHOAS TO UNDERSTANDING; JOB 38:1-7; OCTOBER 11, 2015;
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Claude didn't read it, but there's a warning from the Theologian General that appears on the title page of the book of Job; it's similar to the one on tobacco and alcohol products from the Surgeon General. It says: "Warning: the contents of this book can be hazardous to your theological health and spiritual well-being."

Everyone who reads Job is at risk; of course, some think that it shouldn't even qualify as sacred text. They say it's really a story about a man who is a pawn in a game between God and Satan; or, that it raises the issue of human suffering and asks all the right questions but doesn't provide any of the right answers; or, that it argues more against than for religious faith.

I've heard all those critiques; I've even argued some of them myself and found them difficult to refute. To be sure, Job is unique; there's no other biblical book quite like it; there are echoes of Job's despair in Ecclesiastes and in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prays for strength and when he feels forsaken on the cross. But no other book is as fully devoted to the subject of human suffering and injustice as Job.

Job is what my playwright friend Neil Wechsler calls a mytho-poetic story – like much great literature of the Western tradition – or Eastern religions and culture.

What makes Job unique among epic stories of the ancient Greeks and medieval English and Italians is that it reveals the core identity and beliefs of the Jewish people that become, in part, the core identity and beliefs of Christians.

Here's a deeper analysis from Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann: *human utterance* in sacred text is understood as a true and reliable disclosure of who God is. For example, when the psalmist says, "The Lord is my shepherd." But when we consider the utterances of chapter 38 of the Book of Job we notice something very different; we notice that Job's testimony, which is in conflict with Yahweh, leads to a deeper revelation and acceptance of Yahweh. Job's protests and Yahweh's response packaged in a rejection transport them both into a divine/human relationship not found elsewhere in Scripture.

Job and God are on a collision course but after the wreck they are inseparably linked having taken the biblical understanding of human suffering out of the realm of morality and justice and into a cosmic perspective bounded by mystery. Scholars have noted how the persistence of the creature, Job, helps to define the Creator, God.

This is a new path to spiritual depth and wholeness; a path that remains undiscovered by many if not most readers of the story who are searching for a more pragmatic and logical explanation for suffering.

Of all the utterances about God the biblical writers could have recorded for posterity the councils chose to preserve and remember Job's. Israel's claims for God rely on a fragile human utterance. Job is a liturgical poem, a lyrical epic, not history, letter, or doctrine. It depicts a universe in which unjustified suffering and an all-powerful God co-exist.

Most of us know the story of Job – he is an upright, honest and faithful man; God says to Satan Job’s faith is so strong that Job will not renounce God for any misfortune that befalls him. Satan accepts the challenge. God then places Job under the dominion of Satan and says he may do with Job what he pleases but take his life.

First, come the skin diseases, then the loss of property and family; God does not appear from the time the deal with Satan is struck until the end of the book; Job petitions God for some explanation, some understanding of his plight. But God is silent, adding to Job’s despair. The opening lines of chapter 23 are Job’s unvarnished outburst to God, demanding a reason for his suffering. Finally, in today’s reading, Yahweh appears but he is lordly, haughty, condescending, dismissive, reprimanding, and refuses to entertain Job’s profound question; or to enter into any discussion about justice, sanctions, moral reliability or promises made in Israel’s covenant with God.

God appears ominously out of a whirlwind; the image by William Blake on the cover of your bulletin is a fair rendering. God speaks. But it is not the ordered, logical, morally balanced voice Job expects. Rather, God is displeased by the temerity of Job’s assertions and questions, “Who is this,” God thunders, “that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”

The entire argument Job marshals and relies upon is dead in the water before it begins: the legal argument and model for God; the moral model that faith rewards and sin punishes; the covenant with the Chosen People who are to inherit the earth; the idea that God will be their God and they shall be his people, all previous understandings and theological constructs for the human/divine relationship are null and void.

God announces new ground for his relationship with humans: “Gird up your loins like a man,” God says, “I will question you and you will answer me.” At this point, most readers of the story check out spiritually if not literally; is this any way to treat an innocent victim? Job, who has been deserted by everyone is abused by the God to whom he has been ever faithful and devoted.

The ground of God’s utterances is the power of a Creator God; this is not the prophets’ God of justice. Job and God enter into a dialogue for the remainder of the book that depending on how you look at it either leaves the question of suffering egregiously dangling and unanswered or transcends the best categories we have to deal with our suffering.

The relevance of this book hardly needs to be pointed out; we are surrounded by suffering in virtually all times and places; perhaps it’s that we live in a smaller world and are more aware of suffering on the planet than we ever have been.

From Syrian refugees to the Black Lives Matter movement in this country; from the re-emergence of oppressive regimes in North Africa and the middle east to victims of fire, earthquake and hurricane most recently in California and the Caribbean to our recent national woes with gun violence, we seem caught in an endless cycle of unjust suffering of the innocent.

Then there is our personal suffering, the struggles and troubles of mind and body and spirit we bring to this sanctuary each week.

I've been reading a little *Moby Dick* recently; one writer says "The world's grievances are the "Jobean burden of *Moby Dick*," a massive book with a massive theme; the chase of a massive and demonic whale as inseparable from Ahab as God is from Job.

Launched from their New England port with a curse not unlike the one that dooms Job himself, the crew is enflamed with their captain's ire, Ahab's seething revenge, a man possessed; what compels this crazed mariner when most, having lost a leg to the albino beast, would have called off the hunt long before; yet for Ahab as for Job, it is a chase to the finish wherever it may lead, a relentless journey to death and oblivion that cannot be aborted.

The whiteness of the whale in Melville's words incorporating the very veil of the Christian's Deity on the one hand while shadowing forth the relentless voids and immensities of the universe stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the Milky Way[.] This symbol and the story of its pursuit, defiant of rationality and proportion and the measured dictates of reason, is the pursuit Job embarks upon when left for dead by his family and friends. Job wills himself to find and confront God and demand from the Holy One some accounting for the violation of all the principles he lived by and that his suffering represents.

That chase, for Ahab and his crew as it does for Job, leads not to the profitable harvest of a whale or the ordered explanation of his suffering, but to the destruction of the Pequod, her crew and captain just as Job meets the demise of his identity as a man as well as of the God he worshipped.

When Yahweh asks Job "where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth; Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements surely you know!" He invites Job to step back from his anthropocentric perspective to consider God's unsentimental view of the natural world in which food for the lion's cubs and the eagle's nestlings means the shedding of blood.

The radical nature of this book lies in the rejection of Job's model of God as inadequate. Job's categories are too narrow, his conception of God hopelessly human centered. From Job's perspective innocent suffering had to imply the injustice of God. But by the end of the book, Job proclaims, "I have uttered what I did not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear and I will speak; I will question you and you declare to me. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you."

Job's sufferings are now seen as part of a vast scheme of creation far too transcendent for any mere mortal to comprehend.

Human wisdom is derivative of Yahweh's wisdom and, if there are areas that human wisdom cannot penetrate, it is not because Yahweh's wisdom is deficient. It is because human wisdom is too limited.

For all his persistence, Job cannot extricate himself from the limitations of his own humanity.

In the end, Job does not withdraw the questions that obsessed and drove him, it's just that no one is any longer interested in the questions; not Job, not Satan, not God.

This is no longer a God who reneges on his commitments. This is a God in whose presence the issues of moral symmetry and reason are unworthy and trivial. Rudolf Otto, the great German theologian of comparative religion, had a word for this God – *Mysterium Tremendum*; the greatest philosopher of the modern era, Immanuel Kant, used such encounters with the holy for his definition of “the Sublime.”

Charles Darwin, that man who teetered between belief and non-belief, even after losing his oldest beloved child Annie was able to see and say clearly that the war of nature, famine and death all occur in a larger context that sustains the earth; there is, Darwin said in the last line of the *Origin of Species*, “grandeur in this view of life.”

The issue for Job has evolved from, “Why do I and other godly people suffer?” to “How many I find peace with this God in the midst of my suffering?”

Job, does not possess the wisdom to contest God. Therefore, he concludes in that final testimony to trust this unfathomable God and find peace.

Whether that works for you and me is the question we must face in the midst of the suffering we bring with us today or the suffering that will be ours to shoulder on some future occasion.

That there is peace and solitude to be found out of the chaos of our lives and in the disorienting whirlwind that is God is to be sure; whether it is our peace will be determined by the dialogue we have with the Creator God.

These are matters that call us above the fray of our busy, virtual lives; these are signposts on the way to abundant life that we dare not deprive our children from learning and pursuing of their own free will.

We gather here Sunday mornings to honor the world's grievances and the struggle of Job that each of us inevitably faces. Amen.