

God's Response to Job's Questions About Suffering

God Knows Exactly What He's Doing

In this follow-on post, we'll explore the final chapters of the book of Job, which are puzzling and profound. To gain some context for this essay, it will help to read our previous blog, where we looked at the book's introduction (Job 1-2), and the dialogue Job has with his friends about the meaning of his suffering. Eventually, Job and his friends have nothing to say to each other anymore (Job 3-27), and Job takes up his final position before God in chapters 29-31. He laments the days of his past when his body was healthy and his life filled with family and friends (Job 29:1-11). His present suffering is no longer endurable (Job 30:24-31), and he demands that God provide an explanation (Job 31:35-37).

And so, after enduring the long-winded words of Elihu (Job 32-37), God himself speaks up and responds to Job in a series of speeches that form the climax of the book so far (Job 38-41). God offers two responses. The first offers a "virtual tour" of the cosmos (Job 38-39). God asks Job all of these impossible questions, like:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (38:4). "Have you ever in your days commanded the morning light?" (38:12). "Where does light live, or where does darkness reside?" (38:19). "Can you lead out a constellation in its season?" (38:32).

And of course, the correct response to all these questions is for Job to say, "No I don't command the universe. I don't know the answer to any of these questions. No, I've only lived a short time...."

God's First Point

The point seems to be this: Job claimed that God has fallen asleep at the wheel in running the universe, and because of this divine neglect he's had to endure unjust suffering. God's response is indirect, and it shows how his attention is actually on every single detail of the operations of the universe. In fact, God is privy to all kinds of perspectives and details that Job has never even imagined and never will.

Following the cosmic tour, God takes Job on a corresponding virtual tour of part of the world he actually does inhabit, the earth (Job 38:39-39:30). He asks Job if he's ever provided food for lions, or seen an isolated mountain goat give birth? No? Well, perhaps Job understands the feeding patterns of wild donkeys that roam the hills, or ostriches and their strange ways of caring for their young. Maybe Job and God can have a stimulating conversation about Job's knowledge of war horses, and the aerodynamics of an eagle soaring on thermal air currents. As it turns out, Job doesn't know as much as he thought, even about the world he lives in and should be familiar with. At the end of God's invitations to dialogue, Job comes up short in his first response:

Then Job answered the Lord and said, "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more." (Job 40:3-5)

God has made his first point. Job's many accusations of divine neglect or incompetence have failed. As it turns out, God is intimately familiar with every molecule and creature in his world and knows more about them than Job can comprehend. This is an important moment in the story so far. Whatever reasons God has for having allowed Job's suffering, neglect is not a viable option. Job never does find out why he suffered and neither does the reader. The goal of the book was never to offer us that information. Rather,

the first divine speech makes clear that God does know everything that transpires in his world, and his perspective on the universe has a wider range than any human will ever have.

When Job critiqued God's knowledge and ability, it was based on the limited horizons of his life experience. His brain has only a finite capacity to understand cause and effect from his point of view. God's perspective is infinitely broader, which means he may allow or orchestrate events that from one perspective look morally suspicious, or just plain wrong. However, from a wider perspective, those same events look entirely different. It's similar to a child observing their parent throw a chair at a window to shatter it. From a six-year-old's point of view, this is precisely the kind of behavior that would earn a time-out, grounding, or worse. But if the parent knows there's smoke coming from the adjacent room and that this window was the only way out, all of a sudden the broken window becomes a life-saving escape route. The parent has a wider range of available information that makes the same action (throwing a chair out the window) become the morally necessary thing to do.

This seems to be the point of God's first speech. There may be evil and suffering in God's good world that from one perspective may seem needless, tragic, and unjust. But from a wider vantage point, there may be a vast network of factors that make the same tragedy fit into a larger cause-effect pattern that brings about the saving of many lives. It's impossible for any human to know such things or have such a perspective. This means all of our claims to evaluate God's rule over human history are always limited, and will therefore fall short. I don't have a wide enough vantage point to accuse God of incompetence, and I never will.

This isn't a particularly pleasant fact to realize, for Job or any of us. It's an inescapable reality of being human. We are finite, and our brains and sensory abilities are not designed to take in the information necessary to make evaluations of God's choices. We're not God. We're human.

God's Second Point

After Job confesses his arrogance, God responds again, this time inviting Job to take up the divine throne and run the universe for a day. Let Job enforce the strict "retribution principle" he thinks God ought to use in directing the cosmos:

"Clothe yourself with honor and majesty. Pour out your anger to overflowing, And look on everyone who is proud, and make him low. Look on everyone who is proud, and humble him, and tread down the wicked where they stand." Job 40:10-12

Job will find the task impossible. It would require a second-by-second micromanagement approach that would essentially result in no more human beings on the planet. Job doesn't know what he's asking for when he demands that God uses the strict principle of retribution to reward every good deed and punish every bad one. In theory it sounds right, but in execution, it would create a universe where no human would ever have a chance for trial and error or, more importantly, for growth and change.

This leads to God's final response. He introduces Job to two fantastic creatures, one called "behemoth" (Job 40:15), and the other "Leviathan" (Job 41:1). Both are Hebrew words spelled with English letters. Behemoth is a common word for domesticated animals, like cows (Deuteronomy 5:14), goats (Lev 1:2), or even horses (Nehemiah 2:12). But in this case, the word describes a river creature who lives in the reeds with a gigantic tail and thick bones. It sounds like a hippo with a dinosaur tail, and since the mid-1600s, this has been a common interpretation. It likely refers to an animal that was little-known to the author, and so was able to take on mythical proportions. Perhaps it refers to a now-extinct mammal. We'll simply never know for certain.

Knowing the specific animal will not get us closer to God's point in bringing up Behemoth in the first place! God's purpose in mentioning this creature is its meaning. Here is a gigantic and dangerous beast that lives in splendid isolation from any human interference. God loves it. It's called "the chief of God's ways" in the world (Job 40:19). It's just the set-up creature, leading us to an even more fantastic and powerful beast, Leviathan. God loves to brag about Leviathan ("I cannot keep silent about its limbs!" Job 41:12). We know from the many other biblical and ancient near eastern texts that Leviathan was a common figure in the people's imaginations of that day. It lived in the deep oceans, leaving a huge wake of churning froth (Job 41:31-32). Its skin was impenetrable to human weapons (Job 41:15-17), and it breathed fire (Job 41:18-20). Like Behemoth, we know the Leviathan was a creature living within the boundaries of the real and mythical for ancient people. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Babylonian literature, Leviathan is a mythical symbol of violence and chaos in God's world (see Ps 74:14 and Isa 27:1). This concept certainly emerged from the sporadic contact ancient sailors had with immense, dangerous ocean creatures that were little-known and greatly feared. The biblical authors, including the author of Job, had done deep theological reflection on the existence of such creatures in God's world. Leviathan poses no threat to God and is certainly not a rival god, as the Egyptians believed (see the docile Leviathan in Ps 104:26). All of this background helps us understand God's point in bringing up Leviathan.

God asks Job if he is able to pull in Leviathan with a fishing pole, or take it home as a pet (Job 41:1-7). God counsels Job to do no such thing because Leviathan is the kind of animal that will bite off your arm without a second thought (Job 41:8). And, notice this important point, Leviathan is not evil or bad. Nowhere in this speech is Leviathan called wicked or unfortunate or described as a sad consequence of sin or the fall (referring to Gen 3). Just the opposite, Leviathan is beloved by God, a wonderful creature of great power and might. God is proud of this animal, and apparently, thinks it belongs in this world. Just don't touch it or it will annihilate you.

This is fascinating. Here is a creature that will ruin your life if you happen upon it, but God loves it. Why does God even bring this up at all? Apparently, God's world is ordered enough for the human project to flourish, but chaos has not been eradicated entirely from God's world. The *tohu-va-vohu* (Hebrew for "formless and void" in Gen 1:2) wilderness wasteland of Genesis 1 wasn't eliminated when God made the world. Rather, a space for garden-order was carved out and given over to humans who were commissioned to spread that divine order further out. Leviathan is out there, raw and dangerous, and you just might encounter it. It has the power to wreak havoc on your life, but what you cannot conclude from a run-in with Leviathan is that God is punishing you, or that this creature is evil. Neither is the case. You just bumped into Leviathan, and it unleashed chaos, tooth, and claw into your life, and your body.

The Overall Point

Hebrew Bible scholar John Walton puts it this way in his commentary on Job:

God's answer to Job does not explain why righteous people suffer, because the cosmos is not designed to prevent righteous people from suffering. Job questioned God's design, and God responded that Job had insufficient knowledge to do so. Job questioned God's justice, and God responded that Job needs to trust him, and that he should not arrogantly think that God can be domesticated to conform to Job's feeble perceptions of how the cosmos should run. God asks for trust, not understanding, and states the cosmos is founded on his wisdom, not his justice. [adapted quote]

Human pain and suffering does not always happen as a clear consequence of anyone's sin. There may be a reason, but there may not be. God himself said that Job's suffering was not warranted for "any reason"

(Job 2:3). The conversation with the satan certainly did not provide a reason. That dialogue simply set the stage for the real question of the book: Does God operate the universe according to the principle of retribution?

The answer to this story is no. Sometimes terrible things happen for no reason discernible to any human. The point is that God's world is very good, but it's not perfect, or always safe. It has order and beauty, but it's also wild and sometimes dangerous, like the two fantastic creatures he avows. So back to the big question of Job's or anyone's suffering: why is there suffering in the world? Whether from earthquakes, or wild animals, or from one another? God doesn't explain why. He says we live in an incredibly complex, amazing world that at this stage at least, is not designed to prevent suffering.

That's God's response. Job challenged God's justice, and God responded that Job doesn't have sufficient knowledge about our complex universe to make such a claim. Job demanded a full explanation from God, and what God asks Job for is trust in his wisdom and character. So Job responds with humility and repentance. He apologizes for accusing God of injustice and acknowledges that he's overstepped his bounds.

All of a sudden, the book concludes with a short epilogue (Job 42). First, God says that the friends were wrong; their ideas about God's justice were too simple, not true to the complexity of the world or God's wisdom. Then God says that Job has spoken rightly about him. This is surprising, but it can't apply to everything Job said. Even though Job drew hasty and wrong conclusions, God still approves of Job's wrestling. God approves of how Job approached him honestly with all his emotion, only wanting to talk to God himself. God says that the right way to process through these issues is through the struggle of prayer. The book concludes with Job having his health, family, and wealth restored, not as a reward for good behavior, but simply as a generous gift from God. And that's the end.

So, the book doesn't unlock the puzzle of why bad things happen to good people. Rather, it does invite us to trust God's wisdom when we encounter suffering rather than trying to figure out the "reasons" for it.

When we search for reasons, we tend to either simplify God like the friends or, like Job, accuse God based on limited evidence. The book invites us to honestly bring our pain and grief to God and to trust that he cares, realizing that he knows exactly what he's doing.