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The Mystery of Job

There are two very brief passages in the book of Job which, because they have been included in the book, cause it to be so radically different from what it would have been without them, that their inclusion is *the* reason the book still speaks to us after all these years. And yet, as critical as these two passages are, they could have been seamlessly eliminated from the book (or never included in the first place) and we would be none the wiser: the book would read perfectly well without them and would still result in a thoughtful examination of theodicy, just not one of astonishing and heart breaking honesty.

The passages to which I am referring are the two sections that have God speaking with the Adversary. With only a minor revision here and there, the two passages could be lifted whole-cloth from the text without the slightest structural impact on any other portion of the entire 42 chapters of the book; the only impact would be on the *meaning* of the book, and there it would be enormous. Let's examine the book without these sections – as if they had never been included – and then compare that to the book as we know it (that is, with the two sections included).

Without the God/Adversary sections we meet a man – Job of Uz – who according to the narrator is “blameless and upright”, who “feared God and shunned evil”. He then suffers unimaginable hardship encompassing every aspect of his life. Despite his own protestations of innocence, he is confronted with the wisdom of the day – spoken by his three friends and the upstart Elihu – which seems to be built on two syllogisms:

God is just
God created the world
Therefore, the world is just

In a just world, suffering is the result of wicked behavior
Job is suffering
Therefore, Job is guilty of wicked behavior

This explanation is so accepted and acceptable, so soothing and smooth, so comforting in its logic, that even Job acknowledges that he, too, would advocate it if he were sitting where his friends are: “I would also talk like you if you were in my place”. And for all the narrator's efforts to present Job as beyond reproach – buttressed by Job's many

declarations of his own righteousness – the logic of the syllogisms *is* compelling and, in fact, could serve to explain Job's suffering. After all, is any man truly blameless, any life truly lived in perfection? How do we know of Job's innocence other than from the narrator's opening statement and Job's self descriptions? Isn't it possible that Job has done *something* to warrant his punishment and doesn't this raise at least the *possibility* of a cause and effect relationship between Job's behavior and his condition? This would leave us with the wiggle room we need to explain Job's suffering.

The book of Job *without* the God/Adversary sections, then, presents us with two key points. The first is that, despite any indications to the contrary, there is a causal relationship between behavior and consequence (i.e., good behavior results in prosperity, health, etc., while bad behavior results in punishment and suffering). The second is that the ways of the divine source that drives this causal relationship are beyond man's understanding.

By contrast, in the version of the book *with* the God/Adversary sections we meet a man – Job of Uz – who *truly is* “blameless and upright”, who *really does* fear God and shun evil. How can we be so sure of Job's righteousness? Because God (not only the narrator or Job) declares it so: “There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil”. In fact, it is *exactly Job's innocence* that causes God to bring him to the Adversary's attention; it is *because Job is innocent* that God allows the Adversary to subject him to suffering.

Now when we listen to the syllogisms in the mouths of the friends and Elihu, we *know* they are false. Since we know that the true cause of Job's suffering is his righteousness, not his sins, the syllogisms are destroyed, and with their destruction goes all of the comfort they provided. We are left without even the *possibility* that the accepted position regarding suffering is true. While the characters in the book of Job are unaware of the heavenly conversation that has led them to this juncture, we the readers have been granted no such respite, but instead are forced to deal with the fact that the only thing that connects the dots of Job's behavior and his suffering is God's ... what? ... egotism? His vulnerability to the goading of the Adversary? His sense of competitiveness? His need to prove His power through the power of Job's commitment to Him? Whatever the motive, the only thing ultimately proven is that the blameless *do* suffer *through no fault of their own*.

How incredible a theodicy is this! What were the redactors thinking when they chose to include this book in the Bible in this way? Why didn't they do the obvious and easy thing, namely, remove the God/Adversary sections and give us just that wisp of opportunity that we would need to construct a tolerable – and maybe even hopeful – theological position regarding evil in the world? Instead, we are left with a God who inflicts horrendous suffering on Job *because Job is innocent*.

Where is the comfort in this? Where is the quieting assurance that suffering is ultimately just? Where is the clear cut “if ... then” relationship between good behavior and reward, and bad behavior and punishment? The answer, I believe, -- what the story of Job *with* the God/Adversary sections is telling us – is that there *is no such answer*. Despite the common beliefs of the three friends and Elihu, there is no slick syllogism that can explain away the presence of evil and its stunning oppression of the innocent; to posit one would be a grave injustice to the reality of suffering and the reality of innocence. How, after all, can we ever explain away the ovens of Auschwitz without insulting the memory of the millions who perished there? The child who dies of cancer, the mother whose congenital heart disease deprives her of seeing her children grown with children of their own, deserve more than formulaic responses. Aren't suffering and evil too real, too consuming to be reduced to pabulum? Isn't the answer that is presented to us in the book of Job *with* the God/Adversary exchanges – namely, that *there is no answer* – the *only* answer that ultimately acknowledges the reality of evil and honors the struggle of the innocent?

Thus, the book of Job strips us of all the easy and conventional theological positions regarding the reality of suffering and leaves us with only a radical and unyielding alternative: it is a Mystery. But while the book *without* the God/Adversary sections also speaks of mystery, it does so in a way that renders “mystery” with a small “m”: that version of the book limits the mystery only to man's inability to see the relationship between behavior and consequence. By contrast, the book of Job *with* the God/Adversary sections rejects that simplistic definition and confronts us with one that requires us to use a capital “m”. Its definition of “capital-m-Mystery” proclaims that it is the cause and effect relationship of behavior and consequence itself – not just its perception by man, *but its very existence* – that is a Mystery, known only to God. Thus, the book of Job refuses to give us the easy way out; it gives us nothing more to cling to than the searing Mystery that bad things happen to good people through no fault of their own. And if this ultimately breaks our heart – as indeed it must – it nonetheless provides

us with the *honesty* that must be the foundation upon which any effort to confront the realities of life is built. Surely, the innocent who suffer deserve nothing less.