

# **The Choreography of Divine Justice: Satan's Wager for Job's Soul**

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## **Abstract**

This essay employs a unique choreographic metaphor derived from dance theater to better understand the narrative structure and content of the Book of Job from the Jewish Ketuvim ("Writings) in the Old Testament. The argument here is that many of the enigmatic parts of the bizarre script of Job become more readily digestible using such an approach than through traditional approaches. The choreographic metaphor reveals an image of a sovereign God holding a meeting in the divine oval office or cosmological command center with angels to discuss the business of the day, Satan included at the table. During a brief conversation, God appears to lure Satan into a sort of wager regarding the faithfulness of Job. Satan obliges by later unleashing every suffering imaginable upon Job in efforts to devour his soul. Innocent suffering is implicitly explained as a divinely-ordained mystery that includes a well-choreographed test of genuine faith in God. Under these conditions, Job reasons it is better not to question God and to learn a lesson in simple cosmological math: being wise = fearing God + turning away from evil. Use of a choreographic metaphor strongly suggests that many important details and questions about the Job script were intentionally left enigmatic, bizarre, unclear or unspecified so that biblical readers and listeners at that time could vicariously participate in the staged cosmological play by imputing information into the script, confirming God's moral order of the universe in the process. The essay concludes by

suggesting key moral lessons to be learned from Job for modern-day Christians.

**Keywords:** Book of Job; choreography; cosmology; God; Satan; soul; dance theater; innocent suffering; test of faith; wisdom; fearing God; literary structure.

## **Introduction**

Often variously described as one of the absolute masterpieces of world literature, a pretty misunderstood book of the Bible, a mental rollercoaster of a read, a great work of art, a puzzling story in the Old Testament, an enigma, and a literal host of alternative sometimes even pejorative labels, Job might easily lead any sane student of theology to shun the discipline of theology altogether. Fortunately, however, there is no need to be overly concerned, intellectually preoccupied, emotionally troubled or otherwise psychologically handicapped.

Once the Book of Job is viewed within the context of a staged poetic dance theater, and thoroughly understood as a cosmological performance or dramatic theatrical entertainment well-staged and well-choreographed to elicit the philosophical interests of particular cosmological audiences, readers of Job can begin to truly appreciate the artful construction of this divine enigmatic narrative that sits in the part of the Ketuvim (“Writings”) of the Jewish Bible.

Before diving headfirst into these rather murky theological waters, a basic descriptive narrative sketch of the Book of Job is in order. Probably one of the most important points to keep in mind as you plow through it is that it is a live stage performance with a cast of many characters, like most well-choreographed theatrical plays, which seriously taxes the reader’s ability to understand and follow the main thematic lines of argument expressed in a particularly bizarre script.

In other words, the argument is that there is a cosmological script underlying the surface script within which there are

spiritual forces at play. If there is a hidden spiritual plot, it is embedded in the peculiar script expressed through a cast of characters, and the mindset that is needed to see it is a thoroughgoing biblical worldview. The cast of characters in this cosmological play consists of Job, his wife (rarely seen or heard from), his three friends (Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar), someone called Elihu, God, and the angels. One of those angels is Satan, otherwise known as the ‘adversary’ or ‘accuser’.

In fact, the entire script of this cosmological theater is framed around a simple dialogue between God and Satan, a dialogue unknown to all other characters in the play itself. Not much is known about Job’s character in the Book of Job. The text prefers to begin this particular narrative of Job’s life by informing us about Job’s character, not comprehensive details about his occupational functions or material prosperity or social achievements. Therefore, Job’s character itself is a central theological issue in the Book of Job. He is admirably described as an intimate man, a blessed man, someone who lives righteously inhabiting a land called ‘Uz’, with a very large family of ten children and possessing extensive flocks of animals (11,000!). He is an extremely pious man, a blameless man, a man who is ‘upright’ and fears God reverently, a man who “turns away from evil” (Job 1:1).

Of course, God is quite content to praise Job in heaven to all who would listen. Soon that opportunity presents itself when one day the “sons of God” (presumably angels) come to visit Him in Heaven, and the inscrutable Satan is among them. So, then, someone is sitting at the table with God in Heaven called Satan, the Accuser or God’s adversary. A reader in any language or culture could easily imagine angels sitting around a table chatting over lunch or perhaps a divine coffee, quite enjoying themselves in casual banter.

Even at the end of the Book of Job, a reader could also easily imagine God and Satan meeting again at a heavenly table and debating about the results, perhaps even parting each other

with these words, “All this wagering and anticipation was quite exhilarating, don’t you think? Let’s do this again soon, shall we?” However, this cosmological stage setting is anything but jocular or casual in terms of its human effects. Job as human is going to suffer unimaginably in the time that follows this heavenly conversation, for sure.

The main point here is that at the very beginning of Job in an unsummoned, impromptu, nonchalant conversation between God and Satan, alert readers are introduced full-boar into the overarching theme of the Book of Job. The suffering of the innocent, and God’s choreographic part in it from the command center of the divine oval office, appears to be the central organizing motif of Job. All of the sub-themes within Job are related in some way, shape, manner, or form to this overriding theme of undeserved but seemingly choreographed or divinely-approved suffering.

### **God and Satan Chat**

So, then, God greets the “sons” who have come to visit him, from where they have come it is not known precisely except for one, Satan. They banter about for a few minutes and then leave God’s presence to go about their daily spiritual routine of saving souls. Actually, we don’t know if they are actually still present when God and Satan are conversing<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The implicit presence of the other “sons of God” or angels during the casual chat between God and Satan, or at least their implicit awareness that such a chat is occurring, raises a host of highly significant theological issues in Christian religion in general, and in the Book of Job in particular. If they are indeed present, why would God allow it? Why would he permit angels to witness and learn about His casual dealings with Satan or how divine majesty conducts cosmological business affairs with humanity? If they are aware, then why would they be complicit in those affairs? As this point pertains to Job, why would these “sons of God” or angels participate vicariously and without objection to horrible but divinely-approved bouts of suffering, pain and misery inflicted upon Job? If they are not aware, then why wouldn’t they be? Furthermore, an all-encompassing theological issue rears its ugly presence, namely, the possibility of God maintaining independence from humanity in spiritual

God and Satan remain together to pursue further dialogue. “So where have you been to lately, my friend?” God asks Satan. (Actually, the Bible states, “From where do you come?”. “Not doing very much lately,” Satan replies. (Just another humorous addition, of course, but one begins to understand the jovial attitudinal flavor of the dialogue.) Satan actually responds: “Just roaming about on the Earth and walking around on it” (Job 1:7).

Now, arguably the theatrical script starts to get very interesting precisely at this point. The question automatically arises: Why would Satan be “roaming about the Earth and walking on it” freely or at will? When a lion or tiger roams the forest, we can surmise what it is doing. When sharks are roaming around the waters near penguin nesting grounds, it doesn’t take too much imagination to figure out what they are doing.

When crocodiles are roaming about waters near a deer crossing, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out why they are there. Let’s not belabor the point, but it still needs to be well-digested by Job readers. The verb phrase<sup>2</sup> “roaming about” conjures up images of hunting for prey, like the lions or tigers or sharks or crocodiles referred to above. By logical extension, Satan is hunting, too.

However, if we rely on contemporary understandings of this verbal phrase, then it becomes an idiomatic phrase that means moving or wandering around aimlessly in some place or area with no particular aim or goal or intention in mind, as in when someone may be roaming around a shopping center glancing at

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Heaven but working in tandem with Satan and the “sons of God” on concrete material Earth to dispense ever-so-frightening, ever-so-unpredictable, ever-so-unknowable but, still, ever-so-righteous divine justice.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, verb phrases are syntactic units consisting of at least one verb plus its dependent complements, objects, and other modifiers NOT always including a subject. Most importantly, cannot stand alone in a sentence but express an idea and help to set the mood of the sentence. In regards to the passage in Job under examination, it is perhaps clear what kind of ‘mood’ is established.

products with no intention or ability to buy anything except just to waste time. Or perhaps when great herds of buffalo roamed about freely in the 18th century American mid-West. Or maybe when wild deer roam about freely over the hills or in the forests.

On the other hand, perhaps there have been reports of a bear roaming around the neighborhood, so beware. Yes, to 'roam' can mean to wander aimlessly without a plan or a target goal, but the diabolical imagery of Satan in the Judeo-Christian Bible makes it highly unlikely that this is the intended meaning in Job. The fact that God grants Satan's wish and knowingly sends (?) Satan out to feast upon the suffering of Job makes the hunter metaphor a much more reasonable application here.

In any case, God is in a boastful mood regarding Job, so He responds to Satan's roaming-the-Earth comment by posing a question: "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." (Job 1:8). In the previous 'roaming' statement, we get a sense of Satan the hunter of souls or at least as an agent provocateur whose cosmological occupation is independently nefarious in nature. Now in this 'have-you-considered-My-servant-Job' statement, God and Satan appear to switch the agent provocateur role. That is to say, Satan's merciless hunting for souls on the earth appears to be the result of divine instructions or at the whim of divine inspiration. Here a divine sovereign appears to be the inciting agent.

That introductory verbal phrase, "Have you considered...?" is packed with cosmological implications. Considered what, exactly? It seems to presume an a priori awareness about the cosmological occupation of Satan as a powerful spiritual being or entity whose divinely-ordained function is to hunt for weak human beings whose faith in God is not rock solid, not absolute but, rather, vacillating, or conditional in some way. Can you imagine having a live discussion with a friendly man-eating tiger who speaks your language in the middle of a forest in some

enchanted mysterious world teeming with wild antelope as it was trying to decide which antelope to eat? This is not a crackpot question, so bear with me for a moment. This mental experiment may help to clarify some of the deeper theological issues at work in Job.

Fine. You look around the forest and take note of the beauty and majesty of all the antelopes as they move about foraging through the forest brush. Then you take note of the specific positions and locations of each antelope, assessing them from a strategic hunter point of view and evaluating which of them would be easiest for the tiger to catch and kill. Then you turn around to your friendly man-eating tiger to suggest, “Hey, have you considered that one over there or this one over here?” Put this way, the main point becomes easier to fathom.

All of this begs the question, who’s organizing this hunting trip? Who’s planning all of this ‘roaming’ for pain, misery, and suffering? Why is the supposedly divine Christian God of peace, love, and harmony pointing out potential human targets for Satan, the Adversary, to devour? There are no straightforward answers to these questions, for sure, and secular modern readers would certainly be mind-bended in attempting to formulate them. But it wouldn’t hurt to ponder some possible answers if modern university-educated readers weren’t so downright paganistic.

Let’s keep in mind exactly who we are talking about here – Job, a man described by God Himself as “blameless and upright”, a man who even offers up sacrifices for the sins of his children, sins that only exist as potentials in his own imagination! That’s an incredible man with incredible piety who adores God and his family both devoutly without question, without doubt. This much is crystal clear, at least from the narrator’s point of view.

However, now we have the object of that love, God, giving permission in rather casual style perhaps even in tandem with angels (the “sons of God”) to the lead spiritual hunter of weak

souls on planet Earth (not to mention perhaps all of the created universe as well) to impose upon this God-defined “servant” Job the worst sufferings and pains imaginable. What’s seemingly wrong with this dramatic cosmological picture? Or is it ‘really’ wrong?

Let’s go back to the continuing conversation between God and Satan for a moment. So, after God points out to Satan that Job fears God and turns away from evil, we sense that He almost appears to be goading Satan to doubt His judgement of Job’s character in the same way we might wish to tempt a fish in secure waters with a worm covering a deadly hook. It seems as if God knows that Satan will bite the worm on the hook, so to speak. Sure as Hell, from a Catholic point of view, that is, that’s exactly what Satan does. He responds to God’s certainty about Job’s character by introducing doubt:

*“Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face” (Job 1:9-11).*

God has challenged Satan to be other than who Satan is apparently designed to be by offering a worm on a hidden hook, and Satan bites down hard. Then Satan challenges God in return by claiming that Job is only pious and righteous and adoring God because he is prosperous. Here the moral implication is clear: take away the prosperity, Job will not be so God-loving anymore. In fact, he would curse God to His face, an outcome which would be totally contrary to how God has described Job’s character.

Let me guess what happens next? I think not. God has choreographed this live stage play quite well, it seems, so he permits Satan to test Job in ways that only Satan is quite skilled



at doing. So, then, God is saying to Satan, “Go ahead, knock yourself out. You think that Job only worships Me because he gets something concrete out of it like wealth, authority, social respect, or protection. Well, let’s see if that’s true. I don’t think you’re right, but who knows?”

It’s important to note here that Satan doesn’t actually or explicitly ask God in the narrative to “test” the genuineness or authenticity of Job’s faith, nor does God explicitly state that He agrees Job’s faith needs to be verified or ‘tested’ nor that Satan is explicitly ordered by divine command to ‘test Job’s faith’ for that specific purpose. Instead, God simply says to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him” (Job 1:12), and then Satan quickly departs from God’s presence.

The point here is that there are a lot of presuppositions and assumptions contained in God’s final words to Satan before Satan leaves, none of which can even remotely be construed as direct divine commands one way or the other. The crafty narrator simply ‘knows’ that the biblical reader will fill in the necessary missing information (i.e. assumptions and presuppositions) about ‘testing faith’ and so forth. Still, one gets a definite sense throughout Job 1:1-12 that yet another routine divine operation is getting underway in typical fashion.

As usual, God is at the cosmological command center greeting executive angelic staff (“sons of God”) who are more or less reporting for duty to the King (of the universe). This is not such an uncommon image conveyed in many parts of the Hebrew Bible or in the Old Testament (for example: Isa 6:1-8 where a king sends out his officers to fulfill a variety of different missions; 1 Kings 22:13-23 where a sovereign King is seen as ruling over all of creation; or Psalm 103:20-21 where “angels mighty in strength...perform His word”, all of them His hosts...who serve Him, doing His will”).

So, then, in regards to Job, the King's divine command center is in full operation mode as usual and God's servant angels report for duty as usual including Satan, the fallen angel. All of this begs the question, of course, of why would Satan be needed in such a 'divine' operation? Why would God have an implied need or a willing desire to include the leader of fallen angels, Satan, the Adversary, as an executive staff member at the divine cosmological command center?

After all, by definition, Satan in the Christian faith belief system is commonly conceived as God's adversary, someone who wants to destroy God's creatures including humanity as a whole and all of creation out of some primitive jealous desire to become a god. But that, my friends, is the overarching question that hangs over and frames the entire book. To get a deeper understanding of the absolutely masterful divine choreography at work in the Job narrative, first we need to take a brief detour and suspend ourselves or hover above the various majestic ideational trees it contains to understand how those different trees are organized.

### **The Literary Structure of Job**

The first thing to notice in terms of the structure and composition of Job is that it consists of a brief narrative prose opening the story followed by a sequence of consecutive devastating sufferings at the hands of Satan, all in one day. The framing prose narrative collapses into a poetic "cycle of speeches" by Job (3:1-26) protesting vehemently about these sufferings and subsequently each of Job's three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) trying to understand his suffering as part of some sort of divine justice, interspersed with Job's terse and unsatisfied response to the attempted explanations (Weeks, 2010, p. 51).

In other words, the framing narrative is prose while the speeches are poetic, a common literary device in ancient literature although no one is quite certain if the story frames

the speeches or the speeches frames the story. Job makes a final speech in Chapters 29-31 still proclaiming innocence and wanting to know the indictment against him so that he could respond appropriately, all the while willing to suffer punishment anyway if God wills it.

Suddenly, from Job 32 to Job 35-37, readers are introduced to a young man (Elihu) who has become upset in overhearing the previous speeches by both Job and his friends, offering his own speech in response with no direct response from Job this time, interestingly enough. Job doesn't seem to find any fault at all with Elihu's complaint against him.

In Job 38-40, God returns only to respond to Job in seemingly indirect and roundabout if overwhelming ways and to issue a direct challenge, to which Job refuses in complete humility and, it could be said, futility, claiming to be too "unimportant" to respond. However, the conversation with God continues until Job admits to God in Chapter 42:1-6 that he may have said some things "beyond his own knowledge and comprehension" (Ibid., p. 66). Finally, the story of Job comes to a merciful end when God decides to restore all of Job's material wealth and possessions, indeed much more than what he had before, including his wife and more children!

### **Perhaps A Few Lessons Learned**

What can we derive from the narrative structure of this particular story about someone called Job, whether or not Job was an actual historical figure who existed once upon a time in a once-upon-a-time land, from the way the Job text as a whole is organized as a literary narrative? One overwhelmingly apparent lesson to be learned is the utter uncertainty and mystery of 'God's ways', if you will. The surprising inconclusive conclusion to the Job story (Job 42) as well as the seemingly perplexing bizarre speeches of God (Job 38-41) adds fire to the fuel of this mystery, for sure. We finish reading Job and we are not so sure it has a message to be learned, but we feel for sure

like we've undergone a most profound experience, an experience not of this world.

Perhaps another lesson to be learned from reading Job concerns the nature of wisdom placed within the context of a cycle of speeches by various human beings as contrasted with the nature of wisdom as manifested in God's words. In other words, human wisdom is contrasted dramatically with divine wisdom to illustrate the undeniably profound differences. Job 26 is a brief poem that appeals to the greatness of God's creation in all the majesty of divine wisdom very much in line with the appeal to the wonders of God's creation in Job 28, all implying that Job knows God has created the world with the highest wisdom and justice. Yet still Job complains and protests his innocence, and only begrudgingly comes to trust that divine wisdom.

Enter God onto the cosmic stage once again. At the end of Job 28 (28:28), God provides a categorical statement defining what is 'wisdom' per se: "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding". Therefore, in these Godly words at the end of Job 28, readers are compelled to return to the words spoken in Job 1:1/2:3 where it specifically states in both places "fearing God and turning away from evil". We are back to the beginning theme of Job, and we are even reminded about the pertinence of Job's response to his wife after he suffers from all of Satan's afflictions.

"Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!", his wife tells him (Job 2:9). Job's response to her is truly admirably righteous: "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10). Indeed, but Job does anything but follow through on his logic to "accept adversity"; instead, he proceeds in the bulk of the following chapters to protest and lament vehemently about all of the "adversity" he has suffered. He doesn't practice what he preaches, so to speak. A fine example of human nature and human wisdom personified! All of Job's various laments,

protests, and complaints, his moaning and groanings (Romans 8:26/Psalm 38:8/Jeremiah 31:18/Ezekiel 7:16) which imply non-acceptance of the adversities of life on God's earth, bring readers back full circle to the overarching theme of innocent suffering.

However, this also brings us back to the central character of Satan in Job. Let's make another pitstop before dealing with the primary theme of innocent suffering and contemporary obsessions in Christianity with the nature of good versus evil. Shortly, we will deal more extensively with the topics of Satan and good versus evil as central themes in Job. First, let us deal with the topic of 'wisdom'.

### **Simple Cosmological Math**

Even more than this, however, we are reminded here and actually throughout Job about the centrality of the cosmological conception of 'wisdom' in oral biblical culture and the integral link to other biblical literature such as Proverbs. Here is a representative sampling of references to 'wisdom' in Job:

Job 1:1-8 – *“fearing God and turning away from evil”.*

Job 12:16 - *“With Him are strength and sound wisdom”.*

Job 28:18 – *“The acquisition of wisdom is above that of pearls”*

Job 28:20-23 – *“Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? Thus, it is hidden from the eyes of all living...God understands its way. And he knows its place.”*

Job 28:28 – *“And to the man He (God) said, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding”.*

Job 32:6-9 – *“I am young in ears and you are old; therefore, I was shy and afraid to tell you what I*

*think. I thought age should speak, and increased years should teach wisdom. But it is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives them understanding. The abundant in years may not be wise. Nor may elders understand justice.”*

Job 33:32-33 – *“Speak, for I desire to justify you. If not, listen to me; keep silent, and I will teach you wisdom.”*

Job 34:34-36 – *“Men of understanding will say to me, and a wise man who hears me, Job speaks without knowledge, and his words are without wisdom. Job ought to be tried to the limit, because he answers like wicked men. For he adds rebellion to his sin”.*

Job 35:10-11 – *“But no one says, ‘Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night, who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth, and makes us wiser than the birds of the heavens?’*

Job 37:22-24 – *“Around God is awesome majesty. The Almighty – we cannot find Him; He is exalted in power and he will not do violence to justice and abundant righteousness. Therefore, men fear Him. He does not regard any who are wise of heart”.*

Job 38:36-37 – *“Who has put wisdom in the innermost being or given understanding to the mind? Who can count the clouds by wisdom,....?”*

Job 42:7 – *“...the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has.”*

From the beginning of Job through to the end, therefore, there is a message about ‘wisdom’ and ‘evil’ and ‘understanding’, and that message is quite consistent. To fear God is the beginning of wisdom, not its result; wisdom ‘begins’ when ‘fearing the Lord’ begins. By the same token, ‘understanding’ begins with

the ‘turning away from evil’; it doesn’t begin in another way such as through knowledge, education, experience, old age, and so forth. Fearing God + turning away from evil = wisdom, plain and simple.

Furthermore, readers are warned that they cannot acquire one without acquiring the other. That is, in order to acquire ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’, they must be acquired together by the same person; an individual cannot acquire understanding without acquiring wisdom and vice versa. If one attempts to pridefully acquire one without acquiring the other, then that person can expect to have God’s “wrath kindled against” them. So, then, Job begins with a statement by God about a man called Job who is “fearing God and turning away from evil” and ends with providing a good reason for doing so in order to avoid God’s “wrath” being “kindled against you”.

### **Satan Enter for Old Time’s Sake**

Despite the sarcastic flavoring of the subtitle to this section of the essay, there is yet another lesson to be learned about the character of Satan in Job, if anything is to be learned at all. In the Old Testament, Satan is portrayed in the heavenly courtroom as an angel standing next to another angel who has brought the High Priest, Joshua, “clothed with filthy garments”, to stand in judgment before God (Zechariah 3:1-2). Satan is standing at the right hand of the angel “to accuse” Joshua of sin. But God rebukes Satan harshly, and then He tells the High Priest that he and Israel are no, longer guilty for breaking their covenant with Him because they have received adequate punishment by enduring Israel’s exile.

The Satan in Job is still the same fallen angel, but the nature of his opposition in Job is a bit different in that it moves beyond an adversarial attitude. Satan’s implicit claim to God in Job is that Job’s righteous behavior is motivated by the sin of selfishness. Job has plenty of reason to be virtuous and righteous and pious and “upright” when he expects that is so-

called 'good' behavior will be rewarded with hardcore divine wealth and blessings. Knowing that he will receive divinely-ordained material wealth and blessings provides Job with all kinds of reasons for being "blameless and upright".

If this is true, implies Satan, then Job's goodness is not authentic; it's smoke and mirrors, fake. Worse than that, it seriously calls into question God's routine cosmological policy of providing material rewards for those who honor and obey Him. Remember at the beginning of this essay what Satan said to God as a basic frame to the Job narrative? Let me remind readers:

*"Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face" (Job 1:9-11).*

What is this interaction between God and Satan here all about? Evidently, Satan is posing a surreptitious challenge to God's traditional cosmological policy of materially rewarding pious behavior by turning the logic on its head, as it were, suggesting that such a policy corrupts the righteous by morally tainting their motives for engaging in righteous behavior.

So, then, while the reader is spending lots of time pondering about suffering and trying to explain the sufferings of "upright" people, Satan is busy at work trying to undermine divine policy by questioning why people should be rewarded for corrupted behavioral motives. This being said, now let's turn finally to the issue of good versus evil as it may or may not relate to the question about innocent suffering in Job.



## **Good vs. Evil from the Divine Oval Office**

So, then, let's go back to the beginning of Job still one more time. As will no doubt be remembered, the "sons of God" are reporting for duty to God at the cosmological oval office on a normal spiritual business day, and Satan is among the angels who are reporting for duty. Satan and God always meet in this same way to banter and argue and gamble about the fate of innocent peoples' lives, right? Wrong. Every time Satan attends such meetings, it's to perform an adversarial role to bring into question the justice and validity of God's operation of the universe. Satan is always fulfilling that part of the cosmological agenda that's on the oval table of the divine CEO.

It's Satan's job (no pun intended) to question God's spiritual policies wherever and whenever it can be done. Sowing doubt about God and God's policies is really the name of Satan's game here. Is it really a 'divine' wisdom that rewards selfishness? Is it really wise to morally taint or corrupt the motives of the "upright"? Is it really 'just' to punish the virtuous? Is it really righteous to have a policy that rewards selfish people with material success? Is it wise to reward all 'good' behavior and to punish all bad behavior?

Asking and answering such questions allows readers to impute assumptions into the text of Job and to draw conclusions about not only Job's character, but also God's character. What's more, and more importantly, it could be argued convincingly that it allows a biblical reader to draw certain conclusions about the assumed moral order of the cosmos or the moral rules by which it is designed to operate most efficiently and effectively.

Among other things, we also need to keep in mind here what the opening scene in Job appears to be all about rather than what we in contemporary times might want it only to be about. The introductory lead-in to Job easily lends itself very well to a panoply of misunderstandings of one sort or another because it deals with topics which modern-day Christians are all enthused

about, namely human 'suffering', sin, good and evil, injustice, virtues, wisdom, understanding, and so forth. Modern readers of Job should remember that is not aware of the opening discussion between God and Satan. Even had he known, it

Maybe that's why it's exceedingly difficult to come to any certain conclusions about what is the main message of Job. Perhaps that's the way this theatrical cosmological drama was written and structured to be so to allow for biblical readers to fill in the missing pieces of the main message(s) in personal conversations and debates between themselves in the privacy of their own homes and places of worship. If we start to question the assumption that all suffering is the result of God's punishment and all prosperity is the result of virtuous or righteous human conduct, then modern-day readers may be able to perceive other strong moral messages in Job. Some of those 'other' messages have been offered here.

Suffice it to say that at this point that the divine oval office scene with which Job begins immediately calls into focus many exceedingly challenging moral and theological questions regarding how modern-day Christians perceive their relationship with God, humanity, and creation. Those ethical questions are raised for us in the "cycle of speeches" and dialogues between Job and his friends, but those ethical quandaries are never resolved in those talks. However, in the poem of Job 28 and in the God talk of Job 38-41 (not to mention wherever else in Job God takes the liberty to talk), the adventure of Biblical reading takes a positive turn towards resolution. That's where the real resolution lies for the implicit questions raised by Satan that are the real theological and ethical challenges of the Job narrative.

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