

Human Experience as the Point of Departure in the Wisdom Literatures: A Demonstration with the Book of Job's Engagement with the Problem of Human Suffering and Theodicy.

Abstract

The Wisdom or Sapiential books, being about the human being as such, is 'the quest for self-understanding in terms of relationship with things, people and the Creator'. Human suffering, especially gratuitous (innocent) suffering, stands out as one of the most universal, question-provoking and challenging aspect of human existence. This is even more discomfoting when such suffering had to go on in a world created and governed by a just, powerful and loving God.

Keywords: wisdom literatures; Job; human; suffering, experience; theodicy

Introduction

Even though, the popular view has always been to offer a defense of God amidst human suffering, the disturbing question has remained: 'How in a world of suffering can you believe in a God of love?' Thus, elaborating the fact that human experience is the point of departure of the Wisdom books, we shall demonstrate how the Book of Job undertook the problem of human suffering and theodicy.

The books of the Old Testament, we identify as 'Sapiential' stand apart from the rest of the books. Most of the Old Testament literature is marked by Israel's awareness of having a unique history and in fact, is concerned with salvation history. Salvation history is the very heart of Israel's faith, and is summed up in the so-called historical Credo (Deut. 20:5-9; Jos. 24:3-13) which revolves around the solemn confession that Yahweh is the God of Israel and Israel is the people of Yahweh (Ps.95:7).

The Sapiential books are solely concerned with human life and nature, and the individual's evaluation of them based on experience and reason. Helping us to understand these books better, Crenshaw had written:

Formally, wisdom consists of proverbial sentence, or instruction, debate, intellectual reflection; thematically, wisdom comprises self-evident intuitions about mastering life for human betterment, groping after life's secrets with regard to innocent suffering, grappling with finitude, and quest for truth concealed in the created order and manifested in Dame Wisdom, (such that) when a marriage between form and content exists, there is wisdom literature.¹

Wisdom literature then, is the union of the proverbial sentence or intellectual reflection and evident intuitions concerning the mastery of life for human improvement, managing life's secrets with regard to innocent suffering, with finitude, and the search for the truth. As such, the Sapiential books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes (Qoholeth), the Wisdom of Ben Sira, and the Wisdom of Solomon) which constitute the principal works of the Wisdom literature are the corpus of the "theological anthropology" of a people (Israel) whose experience of the world were always divine experiences as well, and the experience of God for them are the experiences of the world.

The Spirituality of the Sapiential Books

The features characterizing the Sapiential books include the conviction of the writers that the ordinary human life constitutes the realm of divine-human encounter. Such that, Kathleen O'Connor² proposing the image of the market place as a key to understanding the spirituality of the Wisdom books, not only highlights the fascination of the books with ordinary human existence, but equally recognizes that in the daily human struggles to grapple with the chaos of life, the divine is met. Again, the spirituality of the Sapiential books is characterized by their interest on the centrality of relationships. That is, on how best to relate with those we encounter every day. And so, highlighting the tradition of the spirituality of the Sapiential books, Brueggemann³ articulates three legacies of the Sapiential writings:

(a). Ethical realities of God's word, unlike the traditional commandments given in revelation, are not one-dimensionally settled.

¹ J. L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An introduction*, London, 1982

² Kathleen O'Connor *Wisdom Literature*, p. 13-14

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook for Old Testament Themes*, Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2002, pp. 234-235

(b). In a modern/postmodern world that settles for data and maintains that practical knowledge is power by converting data into technical capacity, the wisdom tradition insists that the demands and possibilities of human life are richer, more complex. Hence, knowing requires, in part, acceding to a non-decoded mystery.

(c). All of data is not in, and thus, ethical judgments and conclusions are only provisional and could be reformulated.

Human Experience, the Starting Place of the Sapiential Books

First, taking into consideration the proposition of Kathleen O'Connor that the image of the marketplace holds a key to understanding the intent of the Sapiential writings, we encounter a realization that the ordinary human existence and activity are of no little consequences to the corpus of the Sapiential writings. The marketplace being ideally a representation of human experience at its most common, harbour the realities of struggles, fortune and misfortune, sinfulness and holiness which form the ingredients of the Sapiential books.

Second, the Sapiential writers thought resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation. God made the world; it is an order within which the human race must learn to live. Hence, they maintained that through wisdom, human beings can cope with the world and live happily and successfully. And so, lived experience becomes the concern of the Sapiential writers who understood experience to a reliability, regularity, and coherence that allow generalizing observations that can be sustained.

Third, the Sapiential books' starting point of every day experience and honest observations create common ground for us to engage with other people just as it was for ancient Israel poetic and literal works that either commend positive actions and attitudes or condemn negative actions, and thus, regulated the sphere of relationships.

Fourth, that the human experience is the point of departure for the Sapiential books is evident in their character of action and dynamism. Being concerned with surpassing the common target of 'mastery of life', it inculcates practical concern for human values – freedom, justice, reward and punishment, suffering – and an awareness of mystery that lies at the root of things. In fact, experience of life, as in the case of the experience of the exilic and post-exilic Israelites, forced or influenced the Sapiential books' confrontation of the surd in the cosmic system, the problem of evil.

Fifth, the three legacies adumbrated by Walter Brueggemann as characterizing the Sapiential writings hinge on one fact: the multi-dimensionality of the world and human demands and possibilities. This surely, depicts an *akin-ness* to the fact of human experience. Human experience in this regard, serving as the point of departure for the Sapiential books, colours their stance that we must take hold of life as both gift and task. That, there are many possibilities but also profound limits, and that honest observation and fidelity to one's experience of life can put one in touch with a wondrous order whose source is God. Of course, the Book of Job comes to mind here.

Therefore, the Sapiential books understood as literatures containing paradigms about the individual and how he can deal with the challenges and demands of daily life; have the human experience as its beginning point. This is because lived experience, as in the case of job, upon serious discernment discloses something of the hidden character and underpinnings of all of reality. In its engagement with human experience; a sceptical and critical thread runs throughout the Sapiential books: the problem of evil – about the suffering of one who is not aware of having sinned or conversely, the prosperous scoundrel.

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People: The Book of Job.

Experience is human. It is not pigeonholed to a particular society or people, yet in its concreteness there is the particularistic aspect of every experience. Suffering in its pervasive character, more than any other experience is more universal and has down the ages provoked many questions. In its various forms: emotional, physical, psychological, and even spiritual, we may have experienced suffering at one point or another. And in such moments and at those particular points we may have anguished to spat the question – ‘Why?’ This ‘Why?’ becomes more revolt-inducing in the face of innocent suffering; a phenomenon which the Sapiential writings from earliest times had attempted to answer. Surely, the question entertained expression in a poetic essay from Mesopotamia, A Man and his God, where:

On the day shares were allotted to all My allotted share was suffering.....

My god, the day shines bright over the land

For me the day is black.....(ANET, 590).

About the reality of innocent suffering, no other figure, however, typifies both the ideal of one steadfast in innocent suffering and the anguished resolute question ‘Why’, as the

biblical character of Job. This character described as ‘a blameless and upright man who fears God, and turns away from evil (Job. 1:1,8), yet had to be made to suffer innocently. Yet, despite this suffering which was made no less easy by the ‘flinty theology’ of his friends, who insisted that he must have sinned to deserve his suffering, the suffering Job remained resolute in trusting God.

(a) Job: The Problem of the Book

As Walter Brueggemann rightly explains: “while it is commonly said that the poem of Job deals with the ‘problem of evil’, or the problem of theodicy’, it is important at the outset to recognize that the issues taken up here are not speculative or cerebral, but in fact concern the most intense and immediate existential issues of faith, morality, and fidelity that grow out of Israel’s older traditions of Torah (Deuteronomy) and Wisdom”⁴. Thus, Job as the problem of the book of Job, refers to the understanding that the circumstances that came upon Job, his reaction to them and the questions they raise are the problems that make the book.

(b) Job and Biblical Wisdom

The biblical tradition included the book of Job in the canon of Scriptures, and scholars identified it as an example of wisdom literature. They have good reasons for this.

First, the book of Job rightly falls within the biblical canon. This is because the God whom Job challenged to ‘justify his ways to humans’ is the God of the Bible. In the same vein too, the interaction between God and Job shows a relationship of a covenantal type. A covenantal relationship which beginning with Adam and Eve, continued through Noah, Abraham, Moses and David has remained anew in the New Testament and the Christian community. As such, the God of Job’s confrontation is the God of the Exodus; who hears and listens to the cries of the oppressed and the suffering and takes a preferential stand for the poor.

Second, the book of Job is distinctively a wisdom literature. The reality that purports Job’s questions is from experiences, from his personal experience of innocent suffering. Thus, jettisoning the theodicy utterances of his friends; who speaking from received tradition (Bildad; 8:8-10), or revelation (Eliphaz, 4:13-16), insisted on his integrity. That is, that his

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Introduction to Old Testament: Canon and Christian Imagination*, Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2003, pp. 294; 303

own experience of what is happening to him is valid and true even if it contradicts common understanding.

Third, the book of Job has another character of biblical wisdom literature: the book functions parable-like. It begins by working on an exaggerated description of Job and his suffering, and compelling us to be involved in what proceeds changes us to have a rethink with regard to our experiences; their significance and sources; it spurs us to take stands even against God and Job's friends. The book in all its creativity and *depthness* leaves us with new insights and renewed admiration for the literary Job and the literary work.

(c). The Structure and Integrity of the Book of Job

Beginning with a prose tale, the author or another assembled the remaining chapters to take on the challenging questions and issues raised by the prose tale: Can God fashion a creature who would love him freely, with no hope of reward? Why must the innocent suffer – for example, the children of Job who are destroyed for the sake of God's bet with Satan? How can God be all – powerful and yet all – just? If he is all – powerful, is he not also responsible for evil and suffering?

The prologue sets the stage for the poetic dialogue of Chapters 3 – 27. At the heels of the prologue, Job's three friends were ushered into the stage. Having heard of what has befallen Job; his friends had come to comfort and console him. After a silence of seven days and seven nights, Job broke the silence in Chapter 3; with tearing and tearful outcry. This is followed by words of correction and exhortation of the three friends, Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad. This discussion in 'debate' form included Job's reply to each person's discussion, lasting for three rounds until Chapters 25 – 27; what should have been the fourth with Chapter 25 ended abruptly. While Chapter 28 was a poem on the inaccessibility of wisdom, presumably by Job; Chapter 29 was the beginning of another soliloquy to balance the one in Chapter 3. In Chapter 29, Job recalls with nostalgia his happy past, in Chapter 30 he takes a look at his innocence and, consequently challenges God to justify the unjust treatment meted him.

Before the response of God in Chapters 38:1-40:2 and 40:6-41:34, in four long speeches

(Chapters 32, 33-34, 35, 36-37) a fourth friend of Job, Elihu, faults Job's eagerness to clear his reputation at the expense of God's reputation. When God responded to Job's challenging invitation, he appeared in a whirlwind. Even though he spoke twice, he never addressed the questions of Job and; to God's two speeches Job responded twice with the

second response of Job signaling reconciliation. It is not a reconciliation that indicates that his questions were answered but one that shows that the breaking of God's silence by himself was enough: 'I had heard with my eyes...but now my eyes see you' (42:5). This epilogue of 42:7-17 highlights the conclusion of the book with the restoration and reward of Job for his steadfastness.

Indeed, the book of Job followed a clear narrative logic. Yet, noticeable disconcerting turns and twists foist the question of the book's integrity. For instance, we can notice 2 Jobs in the book: the job of the prologue and epilogue that appears to accept and condone the misfortune that has become his lot, and the Job of Chapter 3 – 41 who deciding to have none of the suffering he undergoes, like a volcano revolts against God, challenging him to prove justice. For some commentators, the Job who skirts blasphemy!

However, amidst the disconcerting turns and twists, of the disruptions of Chapter 25 – 27, the intrusion of Chapter 28, and the dialogue of Chapters 32 – 37, the message of the book is still not missing. The enigmas created by the structure gaps in the book is deliberate, conceiving them as '**cracks**'⁵ which not only allows openings for meaning, but also for 'more possible interpretations'

Part of the interpretations the book of Job allows is the insight, as a parable, that: even in the darkness of suffering, God is with us; and sustaining us God will see us through.

(d), The Book of Job vis-a-vis Human Suffering and Theodicy

Human Suffering is an existential problem of human existential living. It is an aspect of the crushing experiences of our nature as humans. It is evil, especially in the case of an innocent suffering. At this stage it becomes a theological question, as we are confronted with the thought of having an all-good, Omnipotent Creator-God and a world of immense suffering, pain and misery. Thus, the question: 'can the presence of suffering in the world be reconciled with the existence of a God who is unlimited both in goodness and power? This reconciliation is what theodicy is all about.

Theodicy is at the heart of human suffering because human suffering is a real problem when thought of in relation to an all – powerful and entirely good provident God. Coming from two Greek terms – *theos* and *dike*, literally meaning God and justice, theodicy stands for the defence of the justice and righteousness of God in the face of existent evil. In

⁵ For Robert Caroll, we all live in an interpreted world, and as such, engaged in whatever we do in interpreting interpretations which takes us a couple of removes from the real. So, in reading the texts any 'surprise' is a form

relation to human suffering and theodicy, the book of Job has been seen to be theocentric.⁶ The question becomes:

‘How did the book of Job engage the problem of human suffering and theodicy?’

(e). Job’s Revolt Against God

Surely, the accusation that Job’s fall approves his wickedness by friends; reveals that they have indeed made the exchange for imaginary justice.⁷

Thus, unrelentingly reflecting on his innocent suffering, Job becomes aware of the condition of the whole of humanity. Such that, the only way out left for humans before a pervasive evil, before gratuitous suffering is not just to ask ‘why?’ But also, to complain and long for oblivion and death, since they have no power against God. It is quite apparent at this point that the problem of human existence leads to the problem of God, at least for the believer. Thus, a Job different from the Job of Chapters 1, 2, and 3 who is patient before his sufferings and Godfearing, giving voice to the lament of all those who suffer everywhere in the world identifies God, as been responsible for his misfortune. His moment of suffering and solitude was an experience that made him no longer to be afraid to lay bare his mind before and to God.

Like a truly faithful lover, he dwells in his present desolation and would rather die than give up God. Hence, instead of denouncing God he ‘cursed the day of his birth’ (3:1, 3:3-26; 10:18). Professing his unchanging devotion accuses God of instability. He asks despairingly why his beloved must reject him: ‘Suppose I have sinned, what have I done to you? Can you not tolerate my sin, nor overlook my fault?’ (7:20-21). He becomes rebellious and argues that his beloved is now a ‘cruel’ persecutor (30:21). Job desires nothing, but a conversation with God. Job’s sorrow, despite his appeals to God, mirrors the fact that effort alone has failed to guarantee success.

This disposition that there is a limit to what we claim to know, and of the border between certainty and issues that are only hypothetical and non-historical speculations about unknown matters”.⁶

⁶ See Carroll P. Robert, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*, London, 19181; See also, *Inventing the Prophets & The Bible as a Problem for Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1991). Martin Egbogu, *Eschatological Hope s Christian Theodicy*, Enugu: Snapp Press, 2006, p. 122. Wing-Chiki, “*Gift Theory and the Book of Job*” in *Theological Studies* 67, (2006), p. 744.

Job's passionate articulation concerns the unbearable interface between obedience and suffering, an interface that ought not to occur according to conventional categories of Israel's faith. For Job, God has no right or explanation to cause sorrow to come upon a person unless that person deserves punishment. The proper response where suffering appears to be underserved is confrontation of God.

Job in his lamentation gives voice to the most tragic moments of human experience. In his anguish, when we broaden our perspectives and encounter the numerous instances of wretched realities and lives, in heard in today's world as well, and the radical temptation to long for death threatens everyone with no exception. It threatens even those who, though glad that they are not touched by terrible afflictions, cannot turn away from the reality of the downward slope on which so many people are caught.

(f). God's Response and Job's Resort

Job's faith provoked a dues *absconditus* into becoming the dues *revelatus*. Surprisingly, God did not answer Job's questions – He never told Job why he suffered. Yet, the speeches God made about the inanimate physical world and the animal and bird kingdom were to widen Job's view with regard to the understanding that man is part, not the whole, of God's animate creation. Also, the speeches were to make Job know the true nature of the relation of man to God. Surely, 'when God speaks of the vastness of the creation he is not avoiding the issue. God is teaching Job the wisdom of bearing the pain than can neither be avoided nor abolished but can be shared when there is a whole creation to absorb it''⁷. For us, then it is about learning to live beyond the tragedy, which requires the ability to receive and give within the community.

Truth is, God's speeches were not a theodicy in the sense that they tend to justify the presence in God's creation of those things that render human existence fragile and vulnerable; just as Job's friends had implied (4:5) when they held suffering as divine discipline. The speeches insist that the presence of the chaotic be acknowledged as part of the design of creation. The speeches⁹ gave Job a new realization of his 'smallness' and

⁷ E. Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*, 1984, pp. 13-14 ⁹...to say that there is no single definitive answer is not the same as to say that one cannot gain insight into the problem of human suffering in a world created by an All-powerful loving God. In the book of Job, we come to the realization that our craving for an answer is more often an attempt to elude that which we know is true: that, especially in moments of crisis richness in meaning and even a sense of peace are not had in pre-packaged forms but emerge from the experience of wrestling with God.

ignorance, it equally illumined him to see directly ‘that human beings are not to speak about God; instead they are to listen to Him and worship Him’.⁸

Job makes no single step of flight to a better God; rather he stays resolute in the field of battle under the fire of the divine wrath. He takes as his Liberator the One who throws him in prison, and as his Friend his mortal enemy, as his Defender the One who judges him. Without deviating from the violent assertion of his innocence and God’s hostility, he confesses hope.

Of course, with the reality of God’s overwhelming entrance into the conversation, Job metaphorically ran freely into the fields of God’s love, the world of gratuitousness, where God dwells and where God’s friends find a joyous welcome. He realized that the world of retribution – and not only temporal retribution – is not where God dwells; at most visits it. The Lord is not a prisoner of the ‘give me, I give you’ mentality. For truly, no human contribution no matter how valuable, consequents grace; if it did, grace would cease to be grace. This is the core message of the book of Job.

4. Where Do We Come In?

Walter Brueggemann, makes the point that:

‘it is better to say that the book of Job in an artistic way is endlessly contemporary because the inability to reduce raw life to explanation is a perennial human reality. ...the book of Job invites faith to face the dangers of a connection to a Creator God who is immense in glory but who offers no easy comfort. Such a practice of faith, if honest, may anticipate comforts and settlements here and there; mostly, however, life and faith in a disputatious mode do not shrink from truth-telling that offends friends who comfort and defies God who self-congratulates’⁹

The book of Job’s engagement with human suffering and theodicy leaves us the understanding that we need to trust God in situations when we do not know why certain things are happening. This is not about a blind faith. It is about an active faith, a faith that sees the divine response to the mystery of human suffering in the Cross of Jesus Christ¹⁰;

⁸ Carlo Maria Martini, *Perseverance in Trials, Reflections on Job*, 1992, p. 112

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Introduction to Old Testament: Canon and Christian Imagination*, Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2003, pp. 294; 303

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, pp. 13-14

in the disclosing of God as the Oppressed One in Jesus.¹¹ A disclosure that should stir hope to those who suffer to strive against the structures that multiply pain and suffering,¹² by way of the resurrection victory of the Crucified One.¹³

Also, we must guard against misrepresenting God, perhaps by focusing on his justice to the exclusion of His love, as Job's friends did, or as it is more obvious today, to focus on His love to the avowal of His justice.

Conclusion

The book of Job, with the example of Job's innocent suffering showed the failure of the traditional retributionist theodicy; which in the case of Job would have painted God an inconsistent tyrant and *locate-able* in the commodity culture, and positions humans in a moral-materialistic discourse. However, if what is presented at the end of the book of Job is truly the restoration in double quantity of all that Job had, then the retributionist theory is correct after all. No need for God's rebuke of Job's friends (8:6-7), if God-human dynamics can be reduced to a measurable, predictable, and quantitative relationship.

Indeed, the presence of a happy ending is provocative, as far as the author of the book of Job's choice of concluding the book. This is because as much as it may remind readers of unfinished questions; it also poses new issue that must be addressed: Is the image of reconciliation and flourishing new life an appropriate ending, or is it a betrayal of what has gone before?

After all said and done, rather than merely being irritated at the ending of Job, we might reflect on what the book is trying to teach us by refusing to clear answers we crave. The book of Job's engagement with the problem of human suffering and theodicy leaves us with this truth: not all that trouble us are issues that can be resolved; instead, some of them are dilemmas which we must continue to live with, the anguish that wells up in the question – 'why?' of human suffering is one of such dilemma. There is no single answer that can

¹¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 1974, p. 294

¹² Ibid. pp. 61; 81

¹³ ... so then, when, in suffering the believer questions God, he does so knowing that God, is also implicated in the question, and found in the same place as the sufferer that God not only tolerates evil but that He bears it. (See Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, London: 1973, p. 308). God being Emmanuel, implies a definitive liberation of man from all evil that confronts him.

put an end to that question once and for all.¹⁴ This is the basis to appreciate the reminder of Paul Gardner:

‘In an age where people seek simple answers to God and expect Him to be able answer all the questions that concern them, especially when it comes to health and prosperity in their lives, it is good to be reminded that God is God and is sovereign, that his people can be open and honest before him in their pleading and questioning; and yet that there will often be no simple answer for mankind, cannot even know the whole mind of God’.¹⁵

Sources

- Brueggemann W (2002) *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook for Old Testament Themes*. Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, pp.234-35.
- Brueggemann W (2003) *Introduction to Old Testament: Canon and Christian Imagination*. Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, p.294, 303.
- Carroll P R (1981) *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*. London; See also, *Inventing the Prophets, &The Bible as a Problem for Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1991)
- Crenshaw J L (1974) *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, p.414
- Crenshaw J L (1982) *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*. London, p.19.
- Dorothee S (1973) *Suffering*. London, p.308
- Egbogu M (2006) *Eschatological Hope as Christian Theodicy*. Enugu: Snapp Press, p.122
- Gardner P (1995) Job. In: IDEM (ed.) *The Complete Who's Who in the Bible: The Exhaustive Listing of the Characters in the Bible*, p.347
- John Paul II *Salvifici Doloris*, 13-14
- Kohak E (1984) *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*, p.45 - 46
- Martini C M (1992) *Perseverance in Trials, Reflections on Job*, p.112.
- Moltmann J (1974) *The Crucified God*, p.294
- Moltmann J (1977) *The Future of Creation*, p.61, 81
- Peake A S (1983) Job: The Problem of the Book. In: Crenshaw J L (ed.) *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, (Issues in Religion and Theology, 4), Philadelphia: Fortress Press p.100.

¹⁴ ... especially in our contemporary society where here reigns a tendency to assume that very issue has a single answer. In religious parlance, this assumption expresses itself in the hope that study, prayer and instruction will result in knowing the answers to the questions of life. The structure of the book of Job directs our attention to the fallacy in this assumption.

¹⁵ Paul Gardner, “Job” in IDEM (ed.) *The Complete who's who in the Bible: The Exhaustive Listing of the Characters in the Bible*, 19195, p. 347