



Published by Filament Publishing Ltd
16, Croydon Road, Waddon, Croydon Surrey CR0 4PA

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Printed by Ingram Spark ISBN 978-1-911425-89-2

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Foreword

One of the most damaging myths about religious faith is that it stifles honest questioning and simply demands unthinking assent. Yet the fact is that, from the Book of Job to Christian poets and mystics like John of the Cross or George Herbert, from the writer of the psalms to Frank Cottrell Boyce's searing play, *God on Trial*, believers have not only felt free to express their anger and doubt, but have believed that their faith itself licenses them to express it. The great Anglican writer Charles Williams said about the Book of Job that it showed us a God who had made human beings precisely to ask difficult questions. Like all great works of imagination, it does not offer us a theoretical solution. It gives voice to the turbulent emotions and declares that the landscape can change. It just is the case that some people learn to live both with questions and with faith, and, as Andy Roland reminds us in his afterword on the book's meaning, this is not an easy place to be; but there is such a place, and Job is one of the greatest guides to its geography.

To understand anything about how the book works, we need to hear it as drama, as an exchange of passionate, difficult speeches. Hence the importance of this 'arrangement', which allows us to enter the space of the writer's imagination and the writer's faith as it is tested, pushed and squeezed, almost rejected, revived, articulated in intense protest and equally intense trust. For Christians, the ultimate response to Job is in the record of the God who stands with us in our suffering in the life and death of Jesus Christ; God's communication to the world, God's Word, becomes flesh and blood. Presenting the drama of Job in this way helps us take a small step towards understanding this, as the words become more obviously the flesh and blood exchanges of real people.

Bishop Rowan Williams

Putting on Job

The book of Job is perhaps the most dramatic piece of literature from the ancient world, apart from the Greek tragedies. Its power comes through just by reading some of the 42 chapters of the book in the Bible. We do not know when it was written, or where or by whom. It is unique in the Bible in having as a hero someone who was not a Hebrew. Job is mentioned in Ezekiel 14.20 as one of the three ancient righteous men, Noah, Danel (an ancient king of Ugarit), and Job. It is evidently part of a whole tradition of the ancient Near East of writings exploring the problem of suffering.

However, because it is so long and has had later material added to the original, it is hard to get a sense of the overall drama. This arrangement aims to clarify the dramatic structure of the book, and so allow us to experience its emotional power.

An important task of any arranger is to reduce the actual amount of spoken words. I have reduced the amount by about half. It is generally accepted that over the centuries between the original writing of Job and its present day form several chapters were added, viz. chapters 28, 32-37 and 40-41. Thereafter I have reduced the text further, taking out passages which are difficult for modern audience to understand and clarifying the emotional arguments being presented. The translation used is the New Revised Standard Version, as are all Bible quotations except where indicated. The illustrations are by William Blake.

The structure of the book is three sets of dialogues between Job and his three friends. This is made explicit by the three musical interludes which form a musical commentary on the drama. Suggestions for the music are set out on the next page.

Narrator 2

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. ²The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' ³The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' ⁴Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' ⁶The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.'

⁷So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Narrator 1

⁹Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' ¹⁰But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and not receive evil?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

¹¹Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home - Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. ¹²When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognise him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. ¹³They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

Silence for 2 minutes

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.

First Cycle

Job

3: ³ 'Let the day perish on which I was born,
and the night that said,
"A man-child is conceived."
⁴ Let that day be darkness!
⁵ Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
⁶ That night—let thick darkness seize it!
let it not rejoice among the days of the year;
⁷ Yes, let that night be barren;
let no joyful cry be heard in it.
⁹ Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none;
¹⁰ because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
and hide trouble from my eyes.

¹¹ 'Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?
¹² Why were there knees to receive me,
or breasts for me to suck?
¹³ Now I would be lying down and quiet;
I would be asleep; then I would be at rest
¹⁴ with kings and counsellors of the earth
who rebuild ruins for themselves,
¹⁵ or with princes who have gold,
who fill their houses with silver.
¹⁶ Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child,
like an infant that never sees the light?
¹⁷ There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest.
¹⁸ There the prisoners are at ease together;
they do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.
¹⁹ The small and the great are there,
and the slaves are free from their masters.

The Problem of Suffering

People did, and do, ask "Why me?" "Why did this happen?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?" These are questions as widespread as the human race, and as old as history. But the writers of the Bible did not address these questions, just as Jesus did not.

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." (Luke 13:1-5)

The easiest way to explain suffering is that the people deserved it. It is the argument of Job's friends:

⁵ 'Surely the light of the wicked is put out,
and the flame of their fire does not shine...

¹³ By disease their skin is consumed,
the firstborn of Death consumes their limbs.

¹⁴ They are torn from the tent in which they trusted,
and are brought to the king of terrors...

¹⁹ They have no offspring
or descendant among their people,
and no survivor where they used to live...

²¹ Surely such are the dwellings of the ungodly,
such is the place of those who do not know God.'

(Job 18:5-21, ed.)

However, both Job - and Jesus - will have none of it.

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9:1-2)

The danger of taking suffering as the problem, is that all too easily the sufferer can be turned into the scapegoat. *"Who sinned, this man or his*