



# Kierkegaard and the Book of Job: Theodicy or Doxology?

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Søren Kierkegaard's two treatments of Job provide a case study for descriptive narrative theology. First in the novel *Repetition* (1843), then in one of his *Edifying Discourses* ("The Lord Gave, and the Lord Hath Taken Away, Blessed Be the Name of The Lord"),<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard adopts modes of address closer to the first-order language of faith than that which philosophical theologians have typically assumed for doing theodicy. In Kierkegaard's terms, the effect is to mark the difference between "aesthetic" and "ethico-religious" forms of life and to induce in his readers a movement from the one to the other. In the discourse on Job, as in the biblical text itself, the movement is from theodicy to doxology, and the point is less the resolution of Job's questions than, as the novel's title suggests, the repetition of Job's faith.

Kierkegaard's way of reading the biblical text is of special interest, not least in that it runs against the historical-critical grain of his day and many of the regnant biases of our own. We see this, for example, in his discourse on James 1:17–22 ("Every Good and Every Perfect Gift Is from Above"), where he presents four figures—doubt, carelessness, sorrow, and defiance—to illustrate modes of misread-

<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses: A Selection*, ed. Paul L. Holmer, trans. David F. and Lillian Marvin Swenson (New York: Harper, 1958) 67–86.

*Reading Job—as Kierkegaard does—in its canonical shape and in accord with the classical Christian rule of faith makes it not a treatise on theodicy but an ordeal of innocent suffering in which the power of the curse finally cannot prevail against the work and wonder of praise.*

ing the text.<sup>2</sup> The technique strikes us as much more homiletical than exegetical, and it is—although it lacks nothing in insight into the text. Similarly in the discourse on 1 Pet 4:7–12, we see the rhetorical use of disembodied attributes, nominalizing them into characters of a narrative: love, cunning, evil, and sin.<sup>3</sup>

So it is in both of his pieces on Job. Dismissing modernity, Kierkegaard appears to focus on the “simplistic” prose framework and to trade naively on the New Testament’s pietistic domestication of the (more authentically) *impatient* Job. In fact, he reads the framework *through* the poetic dialogue and dialectically with it, and in his hands the New Testament’s appropriation of Job serves to heighten the scandal of faith. I will argue that Kierkegaard’s approach to Scripture illustrates a theologically normative qualification of the category “narrative” by that of “canon” and a rule-theory of reading in which the governing construal is the church’s rule of faith.

Hence, rather than speak of “narrative” as a governing category, I will be referring to “canon” and seeking a canon-contextual approach to the book of Job.<sup>4</sup> That move situates not only the book, it situates the exegete socially in terms of the institutions and traditions that shape the way she or he works. The canonical context indicates an effort to explicate Job with respect to the communities of faith that composed it, transmitted it, and have collected, preserved, and read it as part of a larger canonical corpus.

#### CANON-CONTEXTUAL READING

Let me identify four instances of this canon-contextual orientation in the essay:

(1) The rule of faith belongs to the canonical context; it reflects a canonical interest in trying to describe the decisive rules and conventions that may not so much typify the actual reading practices of a particular community of faith as normatively *constitute* the community.

(2) The use of Kierkegaard to interpret Job is an acknowledgment, however partial, of the relevance of the exegetical tradition of the confessional community to contemporary theological interpretation; moreover, using Kierkegaard shows the relevance of a voice peripheral to the historical-critical mainstream.

(3) Intratextuality is a function of canon, evident for instance in the discussion of the character of God when I relate God’s praise of Job to God’s blessings on creation in Gen 1. This is also evidenced by the strong interest in the logic of substitution we see running through the book. That interest is clearly informed by the New Testament presentation of Jesus; for the Christian reader, the canon implies a christological reference. Or again, intratextuality is evident in comparing Job’s

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 29–49.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 51–66.

<sup>4</sup>I am forever in the debt of my mentor Brevard Childs, who inaugurated canonical criticism as a theological mode of exegesis.

protests to those of the psalms. We should note that despite the plurality of laments that compose the Psalter, the psalms are collectively regarded as *tehillim*, “praises.” And I argue for the canonical relevance of that point to the book of Job. In short, the canon establishes the context for analysis that invites us to interrelate works of the most diverse points of historical origin and genre.

(4) The canon-contextual approach respects the integrity of the book of Job roughly as it stands, notwithstanding various ambiguities over exactly *how* it stands and what exactly *is* its shape or scope. Primarily, the approach resists the tendency to treat various diachronic strata of the book independently. Notably, there is a strong tendency now to treat the later poetic dialogues over against the earlier prose framework and to pit the so-called “impatient Job” of the dialogues, who is so congenial to the modern temperament, against the “patient Job” of the pietistic folktale. The canonical shape of the text holds the two parts together in a dialectical tension that offers a far more sophisticated challenge to conventional piety (and also conventional postures of iconoclasm) than we otherwise get.

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Accordingly, in this essay, I want to interpret both the wisdom cliché (“the fear of God”) and Job’s notorious proverb (“the Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the Name of the Lord”)—each of which is introduced in the prologue—in terms of the complaints and laments of the dialogues. The complaints fill out and explicate the clichés. Placed in canonical context, the protests of the dialogues work against any simplistic understanding of faith and praise.

## THE RULE OF FAITH

A second dominant concern of the essay is the rule of faith, which is also an aspect of canon. When I speak of the rule, what I usually have in mind is the Augustinian summary, which says, in essence: Everything in Scripture and the world is to be read in light of the love of God, and everything points to the love of God when so read.<sup>5</sup>

My interest in the rule of faith is a function of the analytic relation between canon and community. The rule is the early church’s preferred hermeneutic for reading the Bible as Scripture. It is a summary statement of the rules, assumptions, or axioms that would ideally guide and govern Christian reading. Circularly, it is also an advance summary of the content of Scripture, of what the believer may hope to find as he or she reads the Bible. I am proposing that the rule represents the

<sup>5</sup>See Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 1, 35.39 and 36.40–41, trans. D. W. Robertson (New York: Macmillan, 1988) 30–31.

primary imaginative construal of the Bible as Scripture, the imaginative paradigm under which the church reads the canon.<sup>6</sup>

Part of my interest in the rule, however, is its tacit acknowledgment that there are always *extra*-textual factors influencing any given reading of a text. No text is simply self-interpreting; intratextuality is never perfect, never clean. Every act of reading is informed by faith investments of one sort or another, various interests, passions, and purposes with which that reading begins and toward which it moves. The rule confesses those faith investments and purposes that are peculiarly Christian and constitutive of Christian identity.

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To recall the Augustinian formula, there is the obvious circle: we need the love of God—God’s own love—to start with (that is, in order to see Scripture as such) and the love of God is what we end up with. That love of God is also the extra-textual something that we bring to the text. It’s the given we start with. And, in Christian reading, it literally *is* a “given”: the love of God is given by God, which is why we say that reading by the rule of love is a work of faith. It is not cognitively demonstrable that what we say we start with is truly what we say it is, this love of God. And the text that supposedly tells us what the love of God *is* is itself subordinate to this love; it is incapable of fully containing it and, indeed, it is to be critiqued *by* it. Writers and readers construct their text, but they do not control the God to whom they refer.

That God, and the love of God, is the wild card in my deck. This is why the rule of faith won’t work as a useful tool for discriminating among rival interpretations, for making definitive pronouncements about what is Christian and what is not, what readings are within and outside the pale. God is too slippery. The love of God has a sovereign freedom. Among all available readings, the unlikeliest candidates for reading by the rule may satisfy the purposes of love far better than we might ever guess. With respect to our administrative and academic purposes, the rule doesn’t resolve much, but in other respects it may generate quite a lot—which brings us to the next item: the authority of Scripture.

It is, of course, the love of God that stands as the authority behind Scripture, that from which Scripture derives *its* authority. In keeping with the agentic, active character of the love of God, Scripture is authoritative not primarily by virtue of its propositional content, although its propositional content is certainly relevant to its authority. For example, it is authoritative for the theologian’s task of critiquing church, faith, and practice. But I’d say that’s a second order of authority, just as the

<sup>6</sup>Most of this I spell out in my book *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).

theological work done with it is typically second-order discourse. More primarily, Scripture is authoritative as it works performatively to author the life of love in the community of faith and in the individuals who read it.

One of Kierkegaard's virtues is his persistent attention to the performative character of Scripture. That is what makes the ideas of repetition and edification so pertinent. A religiously interested reading of the book of Job would, by the grace of God, occasion a repetition in the reader of a faith (perhaps also an ordeal) analogous to Job's; it would induce a Job-like passion for God and so edify the reader—or that is what the love does, the love that capacitates one's reading of Scripture and is Scripture's true content. "Love builds up," says Paul (1 Cor 8:1); it edifies. The strategy behind all of Kierkegaard's workings with biblical texts is therefore to position the reader for a repetition, position him or her to be edified. The polemic in the first paragraph of this paper against traditional forms of theodicy is largely motivated by the theodicyists' failure to reckon with this canonical function of Scripture. They misunderstand the "language game" that God is playing with Scripture—that God is using our uses of Scripture to edify others and ourselves. I'm questioning not the validity of their construal for certain other reading purposes, only the Christian aptness of it. The most apt thing, it seems to me, would be to adopt a language most commensurate with that of Scripture itself, and that would be praise, even in the book of Job. My reading that follows aims to reflect, however brazenly, a Kierkegaardian/Pauline approach to that model of faith, Job.

## THE BOOK OF JOB

"Have you considered [Hebrew: *set your heart on*] my servant Job?" (Job 1:8). Just so, God initiates the action of the story by praising Job to Satan.<sup>7</sup> But that is not the preferred hearing of many contemporary critics and students of theodicy. For them, from beginning to end God plays the part of swaggering bully or bragging buffoon.<sup>8</sup> However, if one happens to believe that God is love, the linguistic expression for which is praise, it is difficult not to hear these initial words of God precisely as words of praise. Certainly, the belief (that God is love) would be a predisposition for hearing them that way. That's what one might expect of God; we would *expect* to hear God's enjoyment, God's spontaneous expressions of delight in the integrity of the creatures whom God has made as other than himself—delight, moreover, that always seeks to be shared. It is in the nature of Praise to express and extend himself.

So, God's praise calls for a response, which is to say that the divine praise motivates the action of our story. In that sense, one might say that God is responsible for what ensues, and what ensues is Satan's question. This cosmic inquisitor, exer-

<sup>7</sup>"Satan" in Hebrew is *ha-satan* ("the satan"), one of the functionaries of the divine court.

<sup>8</sup>"Them" in this case does not include Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1987).

cising the freedom that genuine praise bestows, inquires into Job's integrity, the integrity of his faith: "Does Job fear God for nought?" (1:9 RSV). Just what *is* the nature of faith, this question wants to know. Can humans be selfless in relation to God? I'm not sure this question is ever answered. More significant is the context in which it gets explored, and Satan's next remark sets this context.

Questioning whether Job's faith isn't ulteriorly motivated, Satan invokes a curse, saying in effect, "Strike all that he owns, and if he doesn't curse you to your face, then I'll be damned!" The form of his speech is that of an oath, specifically a curse. It is not a wager or a dare that God then takes up on a lark. It is a much more compelling form of speech.

Narrative and cultural codes overlap here. As a form of oath, the curse is believed to be a self-actualizing speech-act. Once spoken, given the right circumstances, it goes into effect almost automatically, magically. And in a world where curse and harm are actualities, Praise—whose logic is opposite of cursing's violence—will let the curse play out. Thus the curse generates the plot that is then enacted on earth. Satan pronounces his curse, and Job is stricken. Will Job be able to maintain his integrity, that wholeness of personhood that Israel believed depends upon maintaining relationship with God? Will he return blessing for curse, or will he curse God and die? This is the plot at the terrestrial level. At the cosmic level, the plot is the struggle between blessing and cursing as forms of power, shapers of reality; the struggle is between praising and damning. Does praise have power, intrinsic to itself, true to its own nature, to maintain itself over against curse, even to triumph in a world shot through with the oily stains of evil?

We should note the dramatic irony effected by this cosmic setting, hidden from the actors on earth. Job does not know what causes his suffering; only the readers do. In the dialogues Job assumes that God is punishing him, that God has turned against him, found fault with him, made him his enemy. As Garret Keizer observes, Job may be the most famous example in Scripture of anger at God, cursing if not God himself—as his wife proposes—then the day he was born:<sup>9</sup>

I loathe my life; I would not live forever.  
 Let me alone, for my days are a breath.  
 What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
 that you set your mind on them,  
 visit them every morning,  
 test them every moment?  
 Will you not look away from me for a while,  
 let me alone until I swallow my spittle?  
 If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?  
 Why have you made me your target?  
 Why have I become a burden to you?  
 Why do you not pardon my transgression  
 and take away my iniquity?

<sup>9</sup>Garret Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002) 267–268.

For now I shall lie in the earth;  
you will seek me, but I shall not be. (Job 7:16–21)

Only the reader knows that this is not true. Job suffers not because God thinks he's a bad man—he suffers because he's the *best*! This is why Kierkegaard calls Job's experience an ordeal: it is an experience that sets him apart as an exception—"there is no one like him on the earth," God says (1:8). The ordeal is an exceptional situation that carries Job beyond the reach of theological and ethical conventions (like the doctrine of retribution) and carries him up against the mystery of evil and God. As an exception, however, Job is also a paradigm, the standard-bearer for both humanity and the God who praises him. Job is God's representative in the test of praise.

Job's initial response to his affliction is the proverbial blessing: again, "the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (1:21). What he asserts here—or confesses—is that, in both the past good and the present ill, he is dealing with *God*. Precisely this is what it means to fear God, to see oneself as always before God, and to receive whatever comes as coming from God. And that is precisely what God declares Job's speaking to be in the immediately following scene. In the second audience with Satan, God repeats his praise of Job who continues to fear God and reject evil (2:3).

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## THE DIALOGUES

Then follow the dialogues. There's no question here: what Job has to say in the dialogues looks nothing like praise, certainly not by any conventional standard. In fact, Job begins by cursing the day of his birth, which amounts to nothing less (if we pay attention to the images in this curse) than a curse upon creation itself, a re-invocation of primordial chaos, a revoking of God's good creation. Then, in subsequent chapters, Job proceeds to challenge God himself—God's care, compassion, and justice—using language so direct and confrontational that the three theologian friends take it as blasphemy. However, by the very directness of his speech, Job is really only continuing to demonstrate what was affirmed in his proverb, namely, that in all these matters he knows that he is dealing directly with God. The man is God-intoxicated, we might say, theocentrically obsessed. Indeed, what he seeks most is to see God and to have God recognize and acknowledge him. This would be his badge of honor.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Gutiérrez cites Job's words in 6:3: "What wonder...if my words are wild?...[But] they are not a rejection of God. In fact, it might well be claimed that this manifestation of irrepressible feeling expresses, even if in an unconventional form, a profound act of self-surrender and hope in God" (*On Job*, 10).

And God does acknowledge him. The speeches from the whirlwind in chapters 38–41 are spoken by the same God whose first words were words of praise to Satan about Job. Now, to Job, God praises the wonder and inexplicability of creation in language similar to certain of the psalms (for example, Ps 148). At the same time, God’s praise of creation serves to correct Job’s illusions about the adequacy of the absurdly limited doctrine of retribution to which Job myopically adhered (as did his friends and perhaps even Satan). In 40:8, God asks Job a crucial question: in effect, “Would you really annul my order (one that includes ostriches, of all things!) to vindicate your own? Must you make me out to be wicked for you to be righteous?” Remember, Job thought God was unjustly punishing him as *unrighteous*. Again, what he doesn’t know is that God had praised him as the *most* righteous of men. His suffering was not a punishment.

Job’s response to God’s speeches is one of shame. He is humbled not just by the inscrutable enormity of God’s order but also by the sheer wonder of God’s appearing to him. As he says (paraphrasing 42:5), “Before, I had only known of you by hearsay. Now I see you.” Job is shamed by God’s honoring him with his appearance. This appearance, more than anything, is what Job had been demanding: not a judicial verdict, but the honor of a response. We can say that Job is shamed even as he is rectified by God’s appearance—indeed, in two ways. First, God’s appearance corrects him: Job thought God had made him an enemy. He was wrong (as the reader knows). He had expected the moral order of the world to conform to the doctrine of retribution. He was wrong (as the reader knows). And secondly, God’s appearance also rectifies Job in the sense of setting him in the right as one whom God honors by his presence.

As for the repentance on dust and dirt, it has been shown that Job’s self-silencing in 40:5 is stereotypical shame behavior in the ancient Near East; it is an expression of shame, not a confession of sin.<sup>11</sup> The issue never was sin; the story is not *about* sin. It’s about an ordeal, an ordeal of innocent suffering in a world where the power of the curse appears to hold sway but in which Praise is at work to rectify, restore, and transform.

Finally, we might find it significant that Job’s self-silencing before God is not for the duration of the story. The narrator informs us that the suffering Job does speak again: on behalf of the friends, at God’s behest. In other words, he performs that peculiarly substitutionary form of praise known as intercession. God puts his servant forward as a paradigm of praise to cover (or shall we say expiate?) the folly of theologians. ⊕

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<sup>11</sup>Charles Muenchow, “Dust and Dirt in Job 42:6,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/4 (1989) 608–610.



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