

Putting God on Trial

Challenging the “Judge of All the Earth”

The Prologue (Job 1–2) envisions suffering and affliction as a divine test of Job’s piety. In the dialogues between the friends and Job, Job insists that suffering like his—seven sons and three daughters dead “for no reason” (Job 2:3)—puts God’s justice, not God’s piety, on trial. He explores this possibility in chapters 9–10.

Job knows full well that filing a lawsuit against God is an exercise in futility, like spitting in the wind.

After all, who dares to challenge the “Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:26) by asking, “What are you doing” (9:12)? Two obstacles loom especially large. The first is God’s refusal to be interrogated: “If anyone does choose to argue with him, God will not answer one question in a thousand” (9:3 REB). The second is God’s superior wisdom and strength: “He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength—who has resisted [God], and succeeded?” (9:4). Under normal circumstances, wisdom and strength should be the virtues of a just God that evoke trust and praise. For Job, God’s power seems destructive, not redemptive; he senses that it is motivated more by “anger” than grace (9:5, 13). God’s wisdom is completely inscrutable; it does not so much reveal God’s presence as confirm God’s terrifying absence (9:11). Eliphaz has in fact urged Job to praise the God who “performs great deeds which cannot be fathomed” (5:9 “Tanakh NJPS”). When Job ponders the God he has experienced, however, conventional words of praise morph into what one commentator has described as a “doxology of terror.” Instead of “praise

Reflections

Trial Imagery in the Old Testament

The word “contend” (Job 9:3; 10:2) conveys the image of God and people coming together as litigants in a trial setting. Typically, God is depicted as the plaintiff (and judge), and God’s adversaries (e.g., individuals, Israel, foreign nations) as defendants. Consider the following examples:

1. In prophetic judgment speeches (Isa 3:13-15; Jer 2:4-13; Hos 4:1-3; Mic 6:1-4; Mal 3:5), God examines, indicts, and ultimately judges Israel for disobeying the covenant. What might be God’s indictment of us personally, or our nation collectively? How should we respond to the charges?
2. Jeremiah 12:1-4 depicts a different possibility; the prophet is the plaintiff and God is the defendant. Imagine yourself as God’s defense attorney. If the charge leveled against God is “Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?” (Jer 12:1), then how would you defend your client?
3. The trial metaphor, with Job as prosecuting attorney and God as defendant, is particularly prominent
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God from whom all blessings flow,” the thrust of Job’s words in 9:5-10 is “praise God from whom all curses come.”

Does Might Make Right?

In the speech preceding this one, Bildad asks, “Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right?” (8:3). For Bildad, the question is purely rhetorical. The only legitimate answer he believes Job can give is “No, of course not.” Bildad also presumes that since Job is suffering, then he must be guilty of some sin. This presumption Job cannot share. We readers know that God has already twice affirmed that Job is “blameless and upright” (1:8; 2:3; cf. 1:1). While Job has not been privy to these affirmations, he too has no doubt that he is “innocent” and “blameless” (9:20, 21); thus he cannot begin to understand why a just and righteous God would use divine prerogatives to prove a “blameless” person “perverse” (9:20) or to “mock” the “calamity of the innocent” (9:23). He can only conclude that God has the power to “crush” and “wound” as God wills, “without cause” (9:17; the same word [translated “for no reason” in the NRSV] attributed to God, occurs in 2:3).

Given this, even if Job were to go to court with God, he knows that he would lose more than just a legal case. He would in fact lose his identity, his sense of self-worth, for God would so pervert his words that he would no longer recognize himself as the one who speaks them (9:21; cf. 9:30-31). As far as Job can discern, in God’s court of justice, “might makes right.” Translation: the earth and all who inhabit it are “given into the hand of the wicked” (9:24), and God, who oversees the administration of justice, is blind to the injustice that mars the “very good” world (Gen 1:31) that God has created and promised to sustain. If God is not responsible for the miscarriage of justice Job experiences, “who then is it?” (9:24).

“Let Me Know Why You Contend against Me”

Against insurmountable odds, Job wagers nonetheless that if God is God, then God must be just. On the strength of this conviction, Job resolves

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in Job. In addition to Job 9–10, see, for example, 13:13-28; 16:18-21; 19:29; and especially Job’s oaths of innocence in chapter 31. It is also a prominent feature of the divine speeches, where God confronts Job with questions that invite his response (38:1-3; 40:1-2, 6-9). Given the frequency of the trial metaphor throughout the Bible, especially in Job, do you believe it retains its importance as an authentic way of describing the relationship between God and human beings?

Reflections

God as Enemy

The Hebrew word for “Job” is connected to a verbal root that means “to hate,” and in a derivative form to the passive participle, “the hated one,” “the persecuted one,” or simply, “the enemy.” The connection can be seen in 13:24 where Job says, “Why do you [God] hide your face, and count me as your enemy?” Job repeatedly accuses God of brutally attacking him as he if were more an “enemy” to be defeated than a loyal “servant” to be praised and protected. In addition to 9:17-19, see also 10:16-17; 16:7-17; 19:6-12; and 27:7-12. What kinds of experiences may cause people to believe that God is more their enemy than their friend? When such experiences occur, what should we say, what should we do, if we wish to be truthful before God?

to let the bitterness of his soul, which will not be quieted (10:1*b*), run its course. Even if he ends up addressing an absent God in an empty courtroom, he prepares the case he would make were he to have the chance. His opening statement would consist of two imperatives that lay the groundwork for his suit: “Do not condemn me” and “Let me know why you contend against me” (10:2). Job insists that he cannot be summarily declared guilty without the presentation of corroborating evidence.

Next, Job rehearses three questions he would ask God, questions he believes would buttress his case, provided God would answer them truthfully. First, has God decided that it is “good” to “oppress” the innocent (10:3), given that God routinely condemns the cruel mistreatment of others (cf. Amos 4:1; Mic 2:1-2; Jer 7:6; Ezek 22:29; Zech 7:10) and routinely promises to judge such oppression harshly (Pss 103:6; 105:14; 146:7)? Second, does God look on what passes for justice on earth with the vision of human eyes (10:4)? If so, then an impartial jury must conclude that God’s discernment is not only limited but also vulnerable to error. Third, is God’s life span fixed by days and years, so that God, like ordinary mortals, has only a limited time to accomplish a task (10:5)? Surely God “does not see as mortals see” (cf. 1 Sam 16:7). Surely a God who claims to be “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 90:2; cf. Gen 21:33; Deut 32:40; Isa 40:28) is not limited to judgments bound by the ordinary constraints of the calendar.

To Question God Is a Radical Act of Covenant Fidelity

On the one hand, Job’s abiding convictions about God sustain his hope that such questions are merely rhetorical. If God were to answer, then the answers would certainly prove beyond any reasonable doubt that God is just and righteous. On the other hand, Job has seen too much, experienced too much, to believe glib assertions about God that skirt his questions. He now has a pained clarity about life, and about the God who created it, that deepens his anguish and makes his questions still more acute and urgent. His question is

Study Bible

For further discussion of Job’s questions about God’s justice, see *NISB*, 714-15.

no longer “Why did I . . . come forth from the womb?” (3:11), as if life is simply a matter of blind biology, but instead “Why did *you* [God] bring me forth from the womb?” (10:18, emphasis added). He refuses to let go the belief that God “fashioned and made” (10:8) him for something more than a life of inexplicable sorrow. To question God, even to imagine putting God on trial, is not a breach of faith; it is instead, Job believes, a radical act of covenant fidelity. It bears witness to the conviction that questions of justice and righteousness matter to God.