

OBSERVER/FAITH & REASON

THE BOOK OF JOB

God wanted Job to argue with Him: Bible scholar

'Greater good' interpretations contradicted

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Job had it all: seven grown sons, three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, as many she-asses, and "a great household, so he was the greatest man of the East." More importantly, Job was a man "perfect and upright, "one who feared God and rejected evil" (Job 1). He offered prayers and sacrifices daily, lest his children offend the Lord.

Then one day Satan, "the accuser," came to God and challenged him, saying that Job was good only because he was blessed; "But destroy all he has, and he will curse you to your face." So God permitted Satan to do his worst against Job, and all hell broke loose.

All of Job's livestock were killed or rustled. All his servants were slaughtered by marauding Sabaeans. His children all died when a tornado crushed their house. Then Satan scourged him head to toe with weeping boils.

And his wife, seeing his ruin and adding to it, scolded him simply to "curse God and die."

Job answers her, "Shall we receive good at the hands of God, and shall we not receive evil?" And still faithful, he will not "sin with his lips."

Then, to add insult to injury, Job is visited by three friends, "come to mourn and comfort him," who instead counsel that God is just — so Job must have done something to deserve his fate.

Over the next three millennia, the Hebrew figure of Job has become the poster boy or icon for "bad things happening to good people."

If the universe is ruled by a God both all-powerful and all-just or compassionate, it seems paradoxical that the innocent are afflicted with such horrible suffering.

"The challenge is holding together the compassion of God and the sovereignty of God," says Bible scholar J. Richard Middleton of Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, N.Y.

"Job never gives up hope that God will vindicate him. But his friends think they need to vindicate God."

Middleton was in Calgary on Tuesday to give the University of Calgary's 2005 Peter Craigie Memorial, honouring the bible scholar and academic vice-president who died in a 1985 car accident at age 47, leaving a loving family and cutting short a Christian scholarly career just beginning to flower.

Middleton's topic was "Does God Come to Praise Job or to Bury Him?" He believes God's answer to Job in "the Lord's Second Speech from the Whirlwind," may not answer the Problem of Evil, but suggests what God expects from human beings.

Some answer the Problem of Evil as does Rabbi Harold Kushner, of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: God is compassionate, but just can't control the intricacies of natural events; so he consoles people in their sufferings, but he can't prevent them.

On the other side, Middleton said, "hyper-Calvinists" are determined to defend God's sovereignty over history, so mankind's total depravity implies that no-one is an innocent sufferer. God blesses and curses whom he will.

Both positions tend toward "Greater Good" arguments: What seems pointless suffering by the innocent serves a greater good, either because a compassionate God must allow suffering to preserve human freedom, or because an omnipotent God wills it, so it must be the greatest good.

But the Old Testament Psalms themselves contradict "greater good" interpretations, Middleton argues in a Herald interview. The Psalms are largely "laments," bewailing to God the suffering of his people. A lament supposes that the suffering of God's people really is evil, and God really could do something about it.

Now, in reading the Book of Job, Middleton concludes that God uses human suffering at least partly to provoke human beings into arguing with Him.

Before a capacity audience of



Job's three friends tell him God is just, so he must deserve his fate.

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Courtesy, U of C

Bible scholar J. Richard Middleton delivers the University of Calgary's 2005 Craigie lecture.

more than 150 Calgarians at the U of C's Rozsa Centre, Middleton began his lecture with the standard interpretation of God's answer to Job: God is great, man tiny. God is wise, man stupid. So man must shut up and take what happens.

Job's three friends, who first come to commiserate with him, begin justifying God after Job curses the day of his birth: "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" he rants (Job 3:1).

This provokes his three friends to insist that either Job has done something to deserve his suffering or God is trying to teach Job something.

But Job "will accept no answer that blames the victim," Middleton told his audience.

"I know that God has wronged me," Job insists (Job 19:6).

Though the friends continue to tag-team Job with assurances that God must somehow be doing right by him, he still holds to his innocence: "As surely as God lives, who denied me justice... I will never admit you are right. Until I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live" (27:2-6).

Strong words, Middleton admitted to his audience; yet sentiments perhaps familiar to pious victims of tsunamis or hurricanes. Further, says the father of two, in his interview with the Herald, this honesty about innocent human suffering once answered his own spiritual crisis.

As a young Jamaican immigrant, Middleton first studied the Problem of Evil as a philosophy student at Guelph University and found no answers. Only "the honesty of Job and the Psalms" brought him back to his faith.

For most of the Book of Job, 34 of its 42 short chapters, Job is harassed by his friends for his presumption in complaining about his suffering, and his own unerring assurance that God has been unjust to him.

Then, unexpectedly, God himself speaks to Job "out of the whirlwind," thundering, "I will question

you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone — while the morning stars sang and all the angels shouted for joy?"

God flaunts — or perhaps celebrates — the order of the universe, the movement of stars and planets, the progress of seasons, at every turn asking Job if he has the wisdom to govern such things (Job 38).

Then God turns to the world of animals: "Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane?" or "Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings toward the south? Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?" (Job 39).

Then, after what clearly seems an attempt to intimidate Job, God challenges him: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!"

But Job has run out of steam: "I am unworthy — how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth."

No answer? Job is in the wrong simply because God is mighty?

Yet more surprising, after this silence, God doesn't let the matter drop: "Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm: Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?"

It would seem, Middleton suggests, that God really is waiting for an answer.

In his "Second Speech from the Whirlwind," God focuses on the mighty mythic beasts Behemoth and Leviathan. Behemoth's "bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like rods of iron. He ranks first among the works of God, yet his Maker can approach him with his sword" (Job 40).

The sea monster Leviathan is even fiercer: "When he rises up, the mighty are terrified; they retreat before his thrashing. The sword has no effect, nor does the spear or the dart or the javelin. Iron he treats like straw and bronze like rotten wood" (Job 41).

It is plain that God is more powerful than these, his creatures. Yet, it is also plain that God does not condemn these creatures, but revels in them.

In their wildness they delight in their own existence, and God delights in them.

After this "Second Speech," Job's perspective has been transformed. Given God's praise of Behemoth and Leviathan, Job no longer stays silent, but answers, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. So I recant and I am consoled about (my) dust and ashes."

God has revealed to Job that he is a being to whom God wants to

talk, even argue. Graced with such attention, Job becomes reconciled to his fragility.

Middleton has three major arguments for suggesting God wants Job to argue with Him.

First, God does compare Job to the wild and untamed beasts Behemoth and Leviathan, but not to humiliate Job with his own weakness and need for taming. Rather, Middleton argued in the bulk of his Craigie lecture, God clearly likes his untamed and mighty beasts. He takes delight in their wild nature and "powerful mouths." Job too has a "powerful mouth," and God likes him that way.

Second, in only three places in the Hebrew Bible does the phrase "dust and ashes" appear: twice when Job refers to himself, but then earlier, in the story of Abraham arguing with God, that God ought not destroy everyone in the sinful city of Sodom (Genesis 18).

"What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?" Abraham asks God. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"

And God replied, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

So Abraham comes back at God: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the righteous are five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?"

So God, agreeing to spare Sodom for 45 just people, eventually allows Abraham to wheedle him down to just to just men (which quota, unfortunately, Sodom can't meet).

Yet the same Abraham who argues with God for Sodom, later hesitates to argue, when God orders him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham is merely, pessimistically obedient. God accepts this obedience, and stops the sacrifice of Isaac, Middleton told his audience; but the scholars' interpretation of Job suggests God had really wanted Abraham to argue for Isaac's life.

At the end of his discussion, God tells Job's three friends that he is angry with them, "because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

... My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Has Job spoken rightly in complaining that God has treated him unjustly?

U of C religious studies professor Eliezer Segal said he found Middleton's interpretation of Job "plausible." It agrees with the rabbinical tradition, "You can argue with God — Abraham did, Moses did, and sometimes God lets you win."

In the context of Jewish tradition, Segal does not find particularly surprising the idea of arguing with God, he says. But it remains unsurprising only if one does not fix on the cosmic perspective of God as creator of all the molecules, stars, galaxies in the universe: then people seem to be no more than "micro-micro-specks."

U of C Lutheran chaplain Klaus Ohlhoff said Middleton's reading of Job has deep pastoral implications, for a church that generally stresses blind acceptance of God's kindness. "Middleton wants us to connect the way we talk to God honestly with the pain of life," Ohlhoff said.

"Talking honestly and angrily with God is part of healing our relationship with him, real therapy. God wants honest partners in dialogue."

For his part, Middleton insists his analysis of Job does not solve the Problem of Evil. Why, in a universe ruled by an all-powerful and just God, are helpless children ravaged, tortured and abandoned to lingering deaths?

Once an Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship worker, now a Free Methodist, Middleton agrees that much of the world's suffering can be truly educative and for the "greater good." But not all. And he will not rationalize the pointless suffering of children.

Middleton does believe, however, that when humans are confronted with the senseless grief of the innocent, God welcomes their honest complaints.

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RELIGION NOTEBOOK

Rural Nigeria Christians fear Muslim conversion

Christians in the rural areas of Kano state in northern Nigeria are afraid to send their children to public schools, fearing they will be forced to convert to Islam, reports Compass Direct mission news service.

Students are being forced to study Arabic, Islam, and say Islamic prayers. Moreover, Christian leaders report, the government refuses to grant churches permission to establish schools in rural areas.

"The strategy is to force Christians to send their children to public schools so they can be forced to become Muslims," said Rev. Murtala Marti Dangora of the Evangelical Church of West Africa, a former Muslim.

He added there are many cases of persecution; 15 Christians were forced to flee Banda village because of Muslim attacks.

Meanwhile, the International Day of Prayer has announced that resource kits for the 2005 International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP) are now available online at www.idop.ca.

On Sunday, Nov. 20, Canadians will join with churches from more than 100 countries in prayer for those who are persecuted for their faith. The online resource kit is meant to assist congregations, groups or friends to pray effectively for the persecuted church.

WWW.EVANGELICALFELLOWSHIP.CA

Jesus's face shows up on pumpkin

In the wake of Halloween, what could be more natural than a pumpkin miracle?

Employees at a Jersey City, N.J., printing plant are claiming the imprint on a decorated pumpkin bears an "eerily resemblance to the visage of Jesus Christ," reports the Jersey Journal.

"My whole department, about 25 people, said it looks like the face of Jesus Christ," said Kathy St. Clair, a company billing clerk. "It's a sign that he (Jesus Christ) is in the midst of everything."

The pumpkin was decorated by St. Clair as part of a Halloween contest. She splattered it with yellow, green, red and blue wax paint, inspired by the horror movie *Hellraiser*. She lost the contest, but co-workers noticed that some settled wax on the gourd formed a likeness of Jesus Christ.

Asked about the possibility of Jesus Christ's face miraculously appearing on a pumpkin, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark spokesman James Goodness said, "I don't recall ever hearing something along those lines." St. Clair later suggested she would list the pumpkin on eBay.

WWW.NJ.COM/NEWS

Pro-life group urges boycott of American Girl doll

A pro-life group has called for a boycott of the popular American Girl doll and book series during the Christmas shopping season, saying the company's ties to an organization supportive of abortion rights and lesbianism are unacceptable.

The Pro-Life Action League's announcement came three weeks after it first spotlighted American Girl's partnership with Girls Inc., a nonprofit youth organization whose advocacy statement supports legalized abortion, contraceptive access and assistance for girls exploring their "sexual orientation." Prior to 1990, Girls Inc. was known as Girls Clubs of America.

For each \$1 "I Can" bracelet American Girl sells, the company has pledged to donate 70 cents to Girls Inc. In addition to the proceeds netted from bracelet sales, American Girl, a Mattel subsidiary, has promised to donate \$50,000 to the organization.

The "I Can" bracelet was launched in September as a way of encouraging girls to "follow their dreams." The American Girl doll and book series is popular among young girls.

"We hope to show American Girl that there are a number of us who really care about what is right and who are offended by their affiliation with Girls Inc.," Pro-Life Action League executive director Ann Scheidler told Baptist Press.

WWW.BPNEWS.NET