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Introduction

"There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1).[1] Thus starts one of the most renowned accounts of innocent suffering in world literature. It starts well – almost too well; like a fairy tale or a fable, it places the hero in an unidentifiable past in a place far away. Job has a large family and significant wealth, and he makes sure that he observes God's commands. How could anything possibly go wrong? The Book of Job invites us to imagine this atmosphere of fulfillment and happiness. Its attraction is perhaps not only its depiction of a wishful state, but also its portrayal of a situation in which everything makes sense: there is correspondence between virtue and health, work and proliferation, sacrifice and God's benevolence. There is nothing troubling on the horizon, no reason to ask questions; everything adds up to the harmonious unity of life before God. But, as we know, the situation soon changes. Satan enters the story and all kinds of evil befall this righteous man.

It has been noted that pleasure is heedless of the metaphysical – it directs us merely toward the continuation of life as it is and its acceptance without question. Well-being is a state in which we can remain unreflective about ourselves and our surroundings. Suffering, however, calls for attention and thought. In disturbing our expectations and desires, breaking into our lives and bereaving us of what we care for, suffering gives rise to thought. In suffering, some kind of evil irrupts our lives, and things can no longer be taken as matters of course (Buytendijk 1961: 24–26). Evil has many faces: pain, death, violence,

[1] All references to and quotations from the Book of Job are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

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More Information

rape, depression, starvation, perpetration, war, earthquakes, tsunamis – the list is endless. In all these cases, life, the world, and – for believers such as Job – God no longer make up a seamless unity. Bodies break down and cease to respond in the way that we expect them to; souls are darkened, unable to appreciate what they found in life before. Dignity turns to shame, and losses break down vital relations and throw us back upon ourselves. These are different modes through which the destructive force we call "evil" ruins what is worthwhile in life. For the suffering Job too, reality becomes different – it is no longer to be taken for granted and is rendered highly questionable, to say the least. The first expression of this questionable state is "Why?": "Why me? Why this way? Why now?" There may well be natural explanations for disease, social and psychological dysfunction, and biological and geological events. While, doubtless, scientific explanations are of much use, they hardly ever answer the "Why?" questions of the sufferer. Such a "Why?" is posed in another register – the spiritual, the existential, the emotional, or perhaps all of these at the same time.

The role of religion in suffering is ambivalent. It can certainly comfort if there is, say, a touch of love despite everything or some hidden, deeper purpose, or perhaps a final restoration in this life or after. But religion might also be felt to be deflecting the real problem, as Job obviously comes to regard his friends' "comfort"; they refuse to see the injustice of the suffering and, perhaps most importantly, they fail to attend to Job's suffering. For Job, the evil of suffering is doubtless; God, however, raises doubt. This is one way to formulate what in modern times has become known as the problem of evil. Put in the simplest form: how could the good and almighty God allow evil to happen? It cannot be denied that the problem of evil is an acute one, especially when it is not regarded as an intellectual puzzle but is drawing near in life. Evil has certainly made people lose faith, but it has also led people to faith – to find a deeper resonance or perhaps a meaning for why evil happens. It is probable

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More Information

that, in most cases, the onset of evil changes faith, as I believe it does eventually for Job (Larrimore 2001: xiv). In this case, the unproblematic acceptance of traditional outlooks must go through the trial of evil, and faith can be returned to only through the redefinition of the traditions that were left. Naïvety is lost on the way and a new form of acknowledgment is called for, tempered by the experiences of evil, non-sense, and pain. However one reads the contested later chapters of Job, from the God in the whirlwind to Job's final restoration, it is indisputable that Job's faith changes significantly.

By addressing some of the central components of the drama of Job, I have indicated the theme of this Element. It concerns the problem of evil – or, more specifically, of suffering evil – and the ways it is reflected on within religious frameworks. A swift search on the Internet will confirm that there is no end of literature in this field, both historically speaking and in contemporary debates. Despite the secular age that has emerged in the West, the discussions have not ceased. This is due, I assume, not only to some sort of "return" of religion in politics and academia but also to the fact that encountering evil calls for thought – thought that, sooner or later, for better or worse, touches religious dimensions (and, at times, denial thereof). A small book like this cannot cover the vast body of available literature and hence requires some confining principles. Having taken the Book of Job as my point of departure, I continue to employ it as my guide throughout this volume. The intention is not to dive into a close reading of the text but, rather, to dwell on some of the central problems that it raises. These problems are explored by consulting ancient and modern accounts from the fields of theology and philosophy, broadly conceived.

Being a classical text, the Book of Job has earned its status by being read and interpreted over and over again for about 2,500 years, and it certainly has a massive reception history: Jewish, Christian, and, to some extent, Muslim. As part of culture, it continues to work silently, forging ways to question and

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More Information

respond to the problem of evil. The text considers physical pain, social bereavement, the origin of evil, theodicy, justice, divine violence, and reward – problems to which I return in due course. Some of the literature on evil – especially the philosophical literature – is inclined toward the abstract treatment of current problems, turning them rather sterile and pale in the face of actual suffering. While there are legitimate reasons for keeping a distance from real evil and suffering when thinking critically, there is a point at which the distance becomes so big that the source from which it arose is lost from sight. Hopefully, bringing along the suffering Job will keep reminding us, in the way that perhaps only literature can remind us, of the lived experience in which the problem of evil has its original home.

What Is the Problem of Evil?

Job's story approaches the question of evil from a particular perspective: that of the innocent sufferer. In this Element, pain, suffering, and evil are regarded as closely related. While there are internal connections between the three, they are not completely identical. Pain emphasizes the physical dimension, while suffering is a wider category that includes psychological, existential, and religious dimensions. Evil occurs where pain or suffering come with a certain intensity and a lack of obvious reason, desert, or motivation. But there are forms of pain and suffering that are not obviously evil, such as pain as a signal of danger or the pain of growth (both physical and social). There is also evil that does not correspond directly with suffering, such as damage to valuable things, natural catastrophes, and the like. Yet it seems that there must still be someone, if not directly, at least indirectly suffering as a result of such destruction in order for it to be called "evil" because evil relates, directly or indirectly, to sentient beings vulnerable to suffering. Hence, suffering is the primary place in which the phenomenon of evil becomes manifest (Dalferth 2006a: 29).

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More Information

Given this rough delineation of the central notions within this text, it is possible to look at the setup of the problem of evil in some more detail. Most of the philosophical problems and interpretations of suffering and evil that are dealt with in this volume presuppose a monotheistic backdrop. Still, it is true that the problem was known about and considered within Greek philosophy, prior to any known exchange of ideas with the Hebrew monotheistic tradition. Of course, the Greek treatment of suffering and evil is marked by another cultural setting and preferences for other conceptions, indeed, against another religious horizon than that which we find in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, the convergences are significant, and therefore the Greek accounts can be regarded as an interesting anticipation of the way in which two different traditions – Athens and Jerusalem – grew into one another during the Hellenistic and later Roman periods, having an enormous impact on spirituality and thought in the West and beyond. Tellingly, the most famous formulation of the problem of evil, written by Epicurus, is known to us thanks to a quotation by a Christian theologian, Lactantius, in the fourth century. It reads:

> God either wishes to take away evils and he cannot, or he neither wishes to nor is able, or he both wishes and is able. If he wishes to and is not able, he is feeble, which does not fall in with the notion of god. If he is able to and does not wish to, he is envious, which is equally foreign to god. If he neither wishes to nor is able, he is both envious and feeble and therefore not god. If he both wishes to and is able, which alone is fitting to god, whence, therefore, are there evils, and why does he not remove them? (Lactantius 2001: 50)

Although, admittedly, having the Greek gods in mind, Epicurus's argument presupposes a conception of God that is shared by the monotheistic traditions as

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Excerpt
More Information

well. It turns on the perfection that is bound up with the analytical concept of God: God must be perfectly almighty and also perfectly good, yet evil undeniably exists. One does not need to be a logician to see that this trilemma does not add up (Mackie 1971: 92).

There are many ways in which to respond to the problem of evil. If there is a pantheon of gods, as in polytheism, one can distribute good and evil to different gods, just as with other qualities, and thus the problem evaporates. Or one can assume a cosmic dualism, where two forces are in a permanent state of war. But if one is discussing the problem of evil within the framework of monotheism, these options are precluded from the beginning. Hence, what seems like the most logical answer to the problem is to eliminate God. Such a solution, sometimes called "the argument from evil," turns the fact of evil into an argument against the existence of God (Inwagen 2008: 4). It is not only logically valid but there is also robust evidence on its side: we can experience evil empirically, but empirical evidence for God is hard to provide – if we are claiming universal consent, at least. Remarkably, for all his suffering, protests, and even sacrilegious sayings, for Job, God's existence is beyond dispute; it is within this faith the problem unfolds. In the West, the refusal of God did not become a viable option until modern times. Before that, God was, so to speak, built into the framework of the worldview (Taylor 2007: 3).

The tradition of modern theodicy, made famous by Leibniz's work with the same name from 1710, aims at justifying God in the face of what seem to be compelling accusations. Compared with biblical accounts, there is more than a hint of a new understanding of God and the world in Leibniz's endeavor. Whereas Job wants to have his case tested before a divine court in order to learn the reason for his suffering, the tables have turned in modern theodicy: God is charged and it is up to the apologetic philosopher to defend him with rational arguments. Whatever implications such a reversal has, it makes clear, at least, that God can no longer be accepted simply as an integral part of a commonly

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Excerpt
More Information

shared worldview. Along with secularization, a new conception of suffering has also emerged. Even if suffering has always led to outcries and complaints, it used to be regarded as a necessary part of life, as testified by the laments of the Psalms. During the Middle Ages, mystics even regarded pain as a privileged gateway permitting an experience of God. At some point during modernity, not least due to new medical competence, suffering came to be regarded as an exception essentially foreign to life. In this light, modern theodicy becomes doubly acute: both God and suffering have lost their roles as immediately meaningful givens (Larrimore 2001: xxix).

There is no doubt that eliminating God solves the logical problem of the trilemma mentioned earlier in this Element. However, for those who have suffered evil, there might also be other, existential reasons for rejecting God: not because of a lack of argument or conviction but due to rage and hate, acts of rejection that, paradoxically, confirm the very existence of God. Such a position might lead to protests against God, which have been widespread in the Jewish tradition since the time of Job. But it might also lead to atheism. However, atheism might not offer as easy a "solution" to the existential problem of evil as it seems because even after the elimination of God, the sting of evil does not disappear. The "Why?" of suffering does not vanish with God but is, it appears, built into the experience of pain, suffering, and injustice (Dahl 2017). Even a confirmed atheist expects goodness in life – otherwise, evil would not be offensive (Moltmann 1981: 48; Løgstrup 1995: 225). But then, the problem strangely recurs in a new form: from whence can this goodness come?

There are, however, other routes out of the trilemma of the omnipotence of God, the goodness of God, and the evil in the world (Meister 2012: 6–10). One might seek to qualify the notion of God's omnipotence either by admitting that there are forces within His creation that restrain His power or by delegating responsibility for evil to free human beings. Alternatively, one may qualify the absolute goodness of God by claiming that there is also a hidden and

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More Information

potentially frightening side to God. And the list goes on. In the subsequent sections, I give attention to the most important of these responses to the problem of evil, creating an interplay between these and the problem of Job.

The Reception of Job

Although the problem of evil has echoes in many religions, the logical exigency of the matter is most pressing, arguably, in monotheistic religions due to the obvious tension between evil and the notion of one good and all-powerful God (Cenkner 1997). In choosing Job as my guide, I have also conceded that the religious scope of this investigation is limited to the monotheistic tradition. Versions of the story originally circulated in various oral and, later, written forms, and most scholars think that the prologue and epilogue of the Book of Job are composed from such preexisting folktales. Included in the Hebrew Bible, Tanakh, the Book of Job later became part of what Christians came to call the Old Testament of the Bible and was preserved, therefore, in both traditions. The figure of Job also found his way into the Qur'an – only in four brief passages, but, nevertheless, not without making some impact. Perhaps it is the lack of a clear identity that makes Job such a widely accessible figure: the events happened once upon a time and in a distant place: Uz. Even though legends and early commentaries suggest that Job was an Egyptian, a Jew, or perhaps a Gentile prophet, his identity has remained essentially open.

No interpretation of a text can reach a detached "God's point of view" from which its ultimate meaning is reached. In fact, a text can make sense only within the possibilities and limitations of a specific cultural tradition. This holds true especially for a classical text – a text handed down over a long period of time and continually reread and reinterpreted, according to shifting times and contexts. Being one such classical text, the Book of Job has been approached at various temporal junctures and has been situated in different religious and

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Excerpt
More Information

cultural contexts. Looking more closely at the nature of the text, it has proved hard to settle on a date for its composition. Most likely, it found its final form sometime between the sixth century and the fourth century BC. It might very well have been worked over in various phases. One indication that this is the case is that the prologue (Job 1–2) and epilogue (Job 42:7–17) are written in prose and offer a different portrayal of Job from that given in the dialogues, which are written in poetic language. There was probably a separate folktale about Job, which we meet in an elaborated version in the prologue and epilogue; the poetic part may have been of later origin and grafted onto the folktale. Moreover, there is also a long speech by Elihu in chapters 32–37 that suddenly enters the dialogue between Job and his three friends. Elihu is not presented at the outset of the story and enters at a point where the dialogue seems to have reached its end. For such reasons, scholars have argued that the text contains several later interpolations.

If we focus on the version that became part of the Bible, it has a relatively clear structure:

- *Prologue*: 1–2. The narrative takes place in Heaven and on Earth. Job is tested twice.
- *Dialogues*: 3–38. The three friends Elifas, Bildad, and Sofar are defending God, arguing that suffering is a punishment for some form of transgression. Job declares his innocence. Finally, a fourth person, Elihu, delivers the last speech against Job.
- *God's speech*: 39–42:6. God finally speaks to Job and exhibits His power as Creator, His inscrutable depths, and the beauty and horror of His creation.
- *Epilogue*: 42:7–16. The text returns to the folktale genre. Job is finally deemed righteous by God and his property and family are restored.

In the early Jewish commentaries Talmud and Midrash, Job's origin is hotly discussed, being a question that is obviously important to Jewish identity.

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Excerpt
More Information

Even though there is a current that holds that Job was innocent, the major tendency among ancient Jewish commentators is to argue that Job deserved what happened to him, either due to his life prior to the story that is recorded or because Job is guilty of arrogating God's position in the dialogue. Talmudic commentaries also tend to play down the harshest protests of Job and to stress that God changes his fortunes in the end (Glatzer 1969: 17–18). During the Middle Ages, the focus shifted toward the problem of reconciling the Job of the prologue with the Job of the dialogue – the pious Job and the rebellious Job. There are mystical and speculative accounts, such as *Zoha* by Moses de Leon, but the most influential account was put forward by Moses Maimonides in the thirteenth century. Although Job is only allotted two chapters in Maimonides's *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides's reading, combining Judaic thought and Aristotelian philosophy, has been very influential. Job is regarded as virtuous when it comes to conduct; yet, according to Maimonides, he lacks proper wisdom. The wisdom Job learns gradually through suffering is that true happiness is not tied to earthly possessions, health, and children, but to true knowledge of God (Maimonides 2000: 74).

In early Christian commentaries, Job is mentioned almost exclusively in references to the folktale of the prologue and epilogue (Nemo 1998: 12–13). And understandably so, because this avoids the troublesome issue of the rebellious Job being on the brink of blasphemy. In the line of interpreters, from Tertullian through Ambrose to Augustine, Job is almost invariably taken as an example of patience that subjects himself obediently to God (Seow 2013: 181–187). The most influential commentary on Job is, however, Gregor the Great's *Magna Moralia*, completed around 590. This work not only influenced the depiction of Job throughout the Middle Ages but was also important for the establishment of the biblical exegesis that ensued. Gregor's program was to gloss the entire Book of Job with exegesis showing how the text refers simultaneously to three levels of meaning: the historical or literal meaning, the

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