

## JOB AND JEREMIAH: UNDERSTANDING THE DIVINE MORAL ORDER THROUGH LAMENT AND RESPONSE

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In the books of Job and Jeremiah, both protagonists lament their respective worldly misfortunes, decrying the tribulations of human existence. In many respects, their passionate soliloquies result from similar quandaries: both Job and Jeremiah, possessing a troubled understanding of the divine moral order, express frustration with their unmerited suffering. However, the two divine responses to these odes of despair differ vastly in content. To Job, God “answers” by linking the human inability to master the natural, physical world with a corresponding inability to understand God’s moral universe. Consequently, divine superiority necessitates Job’s submission to God’s ways, rather than reasoning on them. In contrast, God contextualizes Jeremiah’s suffering, promising eventual political and spiritual salvation for the families of Israel. These disparate revelations represent an inflection in the divine voice, as God shifts from an authoritarian figure to one of hopeful prophecy.

### II. HUMAN INCONSEQUENTIALITY

God’s response to Job’s lamentation celebrates the complexity of the animal, plant, and meteorological kingdoms in order to clearly paint a picture of human inconsequentiality. God barrages Job with questions that assume a patronizing tone:

“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are?’” (Job 38:34-35) These ironic inquiries also demonstrate God’s power over human-animal relations: “Is the ox willing to serve you? Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes, or will it harrow the valleys after you?” (Job 39:9-10) Even wild beasts, cut off from all care of man, are cared for by God at their seasons of greatest need. With these words, God indicates the futility of human involvement with nature. His admonishments reduce the natural world to an incident of divine volition, emphatically declaring the trifling submission of humans: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding” (Job 38:4). The relative insignificance of human life seriously complicates previous biblical understandings of morality, as shown by a close examination of Job’s original curse.

## II. JOB’S ASSUMPTIONS

In his despondent speech, Job reveals his assumptions about the divine relationship with human morality. Initially, after suffering considerable losses and misfortune, Job renounces his day of birth, and human life itself: “Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it” (Job 3:4). But more troubling for Job than misery itself is God’s injustice in implementing such misery. As a “blameless and upright” man, Job consistently complains that his tragedies are largely undeserved. However, such arguments contain an implicit assumption regarding divine-human relations: that human welfare is a function of human morality. Job, drawing from the covenant with God, presupposes that his moral fortitude will guarantee a bright future; so naturally, he finds injustice in his misfortune. He begins to question the very nature of God’s moral order:

“Does calamity befall the unrighteous, and disaster the worker of iniquity? Does he not see my ways and number all my steps?” (Job 31:3-4) Job’s alarm and sadness stem from the apparent futility of his actions. And as shown by God’s admonishing “answer” to his plea, this is precisely Job’s lesson. Finally, Job begins to understand his relationship to divine authority:

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...Therefore I have uttered what I do not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42: 2-6).

Job’s faulty “hearing” of God represents his prior belief that human moral service engenders a happy and fruitful life. But now Job “sees” God with his eyes, fully comprehending the divine message: do not attempt to understand natural or moral order in terms of service and reward; submit to God’s omniscience. Here Wayne A. Meeks criticism is particularly useful: “[Job] perceives the futility of greatness, even moral excellence. He therefore vows to abandon this challenge to God’s conduct.”<sup>1</sup> (HarperCollins, 793) Thus, God’s response to Job’s lament takes on a disciplinary design, intending to show that divine principles of moral government defy human understanding.

### III. JOB AND JEREMIAH

While Job elicits an authoritarian response from God, Jeremiah evokes one of new, covenantal devotion and prophecy. In response to ruthless persecution, Jeremiah laments his human existence in a similar manner as Job: “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?” (Jer. 20:18) God responds through the later prophecies of Jeremiah, making two distinct, divine promises. First,

God cites the past suffering of his people, foretelling future political retribution: “I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound... And you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Jer. 30:18-22). This political offer serves as the basis for God’s second promise, which is a refiguring of individual, moral retribution under the covenant. In sharp contrast from the moral futility of humans he implies in Job, God preaches principles of action and reward: “But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge” (Jer. 31:30). He continues to predict that the future descendants of Israel will be his devoted children. Unlike his response to Job, God’s prophecy promises just rewards in exchange for human devotion and moral excellence. The new covenant with the people of Israel asserts: “[The people of Israel and Judah] shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34). So God’s message to Jeremiah and the future descendants of Israel is one of moral rewards and retribution, while his response to Job is one of authority and moral futility.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The disparate, divine communications of Job and Jeremiah suggest that God revises his own covenant. Joban divine wisdom seems to imply that human, moral action is inconsequential in its minuteness; human insignificance in the natural world mirrors the futility of moral excellence in the spiritual one. But by the time Jeremiah faces his own misfortune, God’s approach to the covenant has changed. Now, Israelis will reap the benefits of their moral actions and divine dedication as God forgives their sins. While

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<sup>1</sup> Jouette M. Basler and Wayne A. Meeks. *HarperCollins Study Bible: NRSV*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 793.

an element of political consolidation threatens to overly characterize the book of Jeremiah, it is clear that God implements a clear shift in his consideration of human existence and human expressions of devotion.