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Divine Complicity (Job 1.1-13)

Sarah Bachelard

The profoundly troubling passage we've just read is sometimes called 'the divine wager'. The Book of Job opens with what looks like a cruel bet between God and Satan. God has boasted to Satan about his servant Job. 'Have you considered him?' 'There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil'. In other words, this one's mine – and you have no power over him. Well, no wonder he's so pious, says Satan – he's got it all. You've blessed him and protected him. 'But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face' – I bet he will. OK, says the Lord – I'll agree to let you test him out; 'all that he has is in your power'. It's a chilling permission which issues in devastation for Job. His flocks of sheep and camels, his donkeys and all his children are killed in a series of disasters, which he learns about as servant after servant comes to him bearing the news.

Over the coming four weeks, we're going to explore Job's story. It's an extraordinary meditation on suffering and innocence, on God, and the possibility of authentic faith in 'the ruthless furnace of this world'. Tonight, we begin with the question of what seems like God's permission, God's complicity in unmerited suffering.

Some background first. The Book of Job forms part of the Hebrew Scriptures – specifically those books of the Old Testament known as the Writings.¹ Other books in this genre include the psalms, proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the book of Ruth. These are

¹ Marvin H. Pope, *Job: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd edition (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1986), xlii.

neither law, nor prophecy, but wisdom literature. The story of Job isn't purporting to be history – it's a work of literature that wrestles with the meaning of the human condition in the light of faith. Scholars don't agree on when the biblical book of Job took its final form, but stories like it are known in the epic literature of the ancient near east from as far back as 2000BC. This is a motif as ancient as writing itself. Why do the innocent suffer? What on earth is God doing about it? How may we speak truthfully of God and of meaning in a world of incomprehensible and random pain?

The structure of the book is important. Most of it's in the form of poetic dialogue – Job laments or argues with God and with his friends, or they with him. We'll see more of this in coming weeks. But it begins with a prologue – part of which we've just read, which sets the action in motion. It's a 'once upon a time' kind of beginning – though, of course, rather darker. And this is significant. Because if we're going to explore this book, we need to get past an initial surge of righteous indignation. How could God do this? How could God conspire with Satan to toy with Job for the sake of an argument, sacrificing innocent people and animals in the process? And so on. But remember this is a literary device – it's not a report of what happened, but a way of imagining how it could be that suffering comes without reason into a human life. The real question of the book of Job is, given that suffering is a fact of human experience, how is God and how is faith, related to that fact?

There's an answer to this question which has a certain logic. It's popular in some circles even today. Suffering is punishment for evil-doing. If you suffer you must have done something wrong. Conversely, righteousness guarantees God's favour – so if you want to prosper, then make sure you're upright and blameless in the sight of the Lord. From the very beginning, though, the book of Job problematizes this way of seeing things.

First of all, it insists emphatically on the unblemished character of Job. Twice in the first chapter, he is called ‘blameless and upright’. The Hebrew word, ‘*tam*’, can also be translated as ‘a man of integrity’. It’s a description, says liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, ‘that emphasises the internal coherence of [Job’s] personality’.² He really is who he seems to be, he is ‘exemplary’. Indeed, the literary premise of the ‘divine wager’, which makes God look so bad, is part of how the author insists that Job himself is in no way responsible for what befalls him. His suffering is not punishment for wrong-doing.

Furthermore, the book of Job insists that faith based on the hope of reward and fear of punishment isn’t true religion. Even the character of Satan in this story presumes that. He knows that if Job curses God when things fall apart, this will prove his much vaunted piety never amounted to much – it was cupboard love all along. The difference between Satan and God is not their understanding of faith, but their faith in Job. Satan, which in Hebrew means ‘the accuser’, doesn’t think human beings are capable of disinterested faith – the kind that would love God for God’s own sake. God, on the other hand, trusts that Job’s faith really does go deeper than this utilitarian calculus.

So – already in its first chapter, the book of Job subverts any attempt to account for suffering in terms of punishment, any assumption that righteousness guarantees prosperity. However God is related to human suffering – it’s not in that kind of way. And Job shows that his faith is indeed not dependent on his good fortune. Despite the loss of his children and all his possessions, from the midst of terrible mourning, Job nevertheless responds to God (astonishingly) with worship (Job 1.20). He says “‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord’”. In all this’, the narrator tells us,

² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p.4.

‘Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing’ (Job 1.21-22). He passes the test – God wins the wager.

The story, conceivably, could have stopped there – with pious, patient Job, who took whatever came his way without complaint and so proved the accuser, the Satan wrong. But just here, a deeper question about the nature of faithfulness in the circumstances of human life begins to emerge. Because – isn’t there something just a bit problematic about Job’s total and immediate acceptance of his lot? It’s part of the genius of the book of Job to press this point. Yes, true worship must be disentangled from simplistic expectations of reward and prosperity – our love for God must be disinterested, unconditional, come what may. And yet, if nothing we suffer – not grief, depression, persecution, not shame, loneliness, the burden of what’s unhealed in our lives – if nothing causes us to cry out to God in need and protest, then are we really here at all? Are we awake to our situation, present to ourselves? And if we’re not present, then what kind of worship can we offer? Is the book of Job really suggesting that true faithfulness to God, requires a kind of unfaithfulness to ourselves and the pain of our experience?

Well, as it turns out, things are about to get worse for Job – Satan and God are not yet done with their wager. And what happens next will push Job to the very limits of what he can make sense of, will press him deeply into the ground of despair. It’s a humbling that ultimately will radically deepen his spiritual possibilities but it goes (as we’ll see) by a long and dangerous way. A way that leads to a different kind of wisdom, to an even deeper integrity and a very different picture of God.