

The Problem of Suffering: Job, The Servant and Prophet of God

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Abstract : Now that people of all faiths are experiencing suffering due to many global issues, shared narratives may provide common ground in which true understanding of each other may take root. This paper will consider the all too common problem of suffering and address how adherents of the three great monotheistic religions seek understanding and the appropriate believer's response from the same story found within their respective sacred texts. Most scholars from each of these three traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam— consider the writings of the Tanakh/Old Testament to at least contain divine revelation. While they may not agree on the extent of the revelation or the method of its delivery, they do share stories as well as a common desire to glean God's message for God's people from the pages of the text. One such shared story is that of Job, the servant of Yahweh--called Ayyub, the prophet of Allah, in the Qur'an. Job is described as a pious, righteous man who loses everything—family, possessions, and health—when his faith is tested. Three friends come to console him. Through it, all Job remains faithful to his God who rewards him by restoring all that was lost. All three hermeneutic communities consider Job to be an archetype of human response to suffering, regarding Job's response to his situation as exemplary. The story of Job addresses more than the distribution of the evil problem. At stake in the story is Job's very relationship to his God. Some exegetes believe that Job was adapted into the Jewish milieu by a gifted redactor who used the original ancient tale as the "frame" for the biblical account (chapters 1, 2, and 4:7-17) and then enlarged the story with the complex center section of poetic dialogues creating a complex work with numerous possible interpretations. Within the poetic center, Job goes so far as to question God, a response to which Jews relate, finding strength in dialogue—even in wrestling with God. Muslims only embrace the Job of the biblical narrative frame, as further identified through the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions, considering the center section an errant human addition not representative of a true prophet of Islam. The Qur'anic injunction against questioning God also renders the center theologically suspect. Christians also draw various responses from the story of Job. While many believers may agree with the Islamic perspective of God's ultimate sovereignty, others would join their Jewish neighbors in questioning God, not anticipating answers but rather an awareness of his presence—peace and hope becoming a reality experienced through the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit. Related questions are as endless as the possible responses. This paper will consider a few of the many Jewish, Christian, and Islamic insights from the ancient story, in hopes adherents within each tradition will use it to better understand the other faiths' approach to suffering.

Keywords : suffering, Job, Qur'an, tanakh

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