

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

The Book of Job is NOT a theodicy.

That is, it does NOT attempt to account for the existence of evil in a world created by a good God.

If G*d is good, G*d is not all-powerful.

If G*d is all-powerful, G*d is not good.

Job does not address this paradox, though the ancient fable of patient Job may **seem** to do so.

Why is Job called “patient”?

Here is the fable, starting with a basic given:

Job “was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). In other words, Job DID NOT DO ANYTHING TO DESERVE PUNISHMENT, as his friends suggest. Indeed, he is not being punished.

So why did Job suffer?

Once upon a time, G*d was holding court. The Accuser [Heb. *ha satan*—NOT Satan, the arch fiend of Christian mythology] came wandering in, perhaps a bit late.

G*d asked, “Where have you come from?” The Adversary replied, perhaps in a somewhat detached tone that failed to please the LORD: “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it” (1:7).

And so, out of the blue as it were, the LORD asks the Adversary: “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears G*d and turns away from evil” (8).

The Accuser answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” (9-11)

G*d accepts the Adversary’s dare: “Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!”

How would you characterize G*d’s behavior so far?

Job loses all of his possessions and his children, but he maintains his integrity, or his faith in G*d:

“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 Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

(21-22)

So G*d wins his bet, as he does not hesitate to point out: “Have you considered my servant Job? . . . He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason” (2:3).

The Adversary's skeptical response is predictable: “Skin for skin! All that the man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face” (4-5).

G*d accepts this bet too: “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life” (6). Of course, the Adversary loses again. Appalled by Job's suffering, and perhaps angered by his patience, his wife asks “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse [or Bless!] God, and die” (9).

Job rebukes her folly: “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (10)

Ultimately, Job is rewarded for his patient faith in G*d. Apparently, G*d “restored the fortunes of Job . . . and gave Job twice as much as he had before. . . . After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days” (42:10, 16-17).

Does Job's ultimate restoration justify his suffering?

Let's ask a different question. Like us, Job is seeking an explanation for what happens to him. His friends argue (with increasing urgency) that he is being punished for his sins. Job rejects this explanation. And so, finally does G*d: "My wrath is kindled against you [Eliphaz] and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7).

Here is Job's truth, and his dilemma—a classical no-win situation:

[H]ow can a mortal be just before God?
If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand. . . .
Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser. . . .
Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.

I am blameless;

I do not know myself;

I loathe my life.

It is all one; therefore I say,

he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.

(9:2-3, 15, 20-22)

Does Job now “sin with his lips” (2:10)?

Finally, after a series (3 X 3) of increasingly anguished and accusatory exchanges with his “comforters,” Job is answered by G*d, “out of the whirlwind” (38:1).

G*d's “answer” is really no answer at all, certainly not the vindication that Job has been seeking. He points out that Job is quite powerless, and also so ignorant that he could not understand any answer that G*d might deign to give him.

Nonetheless, Job appears satisfied. Why? Here is the traditional translation of Job's final response to the LORD:
I have uttered what I did 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. (42:3, 5-6)

What has Job **seen**? (as opposed to mere hearsay)
And why does it matter?

The words in boldface are crucial for understanding Job's transforming experience. Why should Job cave in to pressure at this point and "despise" himself, especially if he has said "**what is right**" (7 & 8) about G*d? The poet & philosopher Stephen Mitchell, in a commentary on his translation of Job (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) offers a translation of Job's final words that seems much more revealing than the traditional, orthodox account:

Therefore I **take back** [what I said],
 comforted that I am dust.

Read the handout for a discussion of Mitchell's comments.