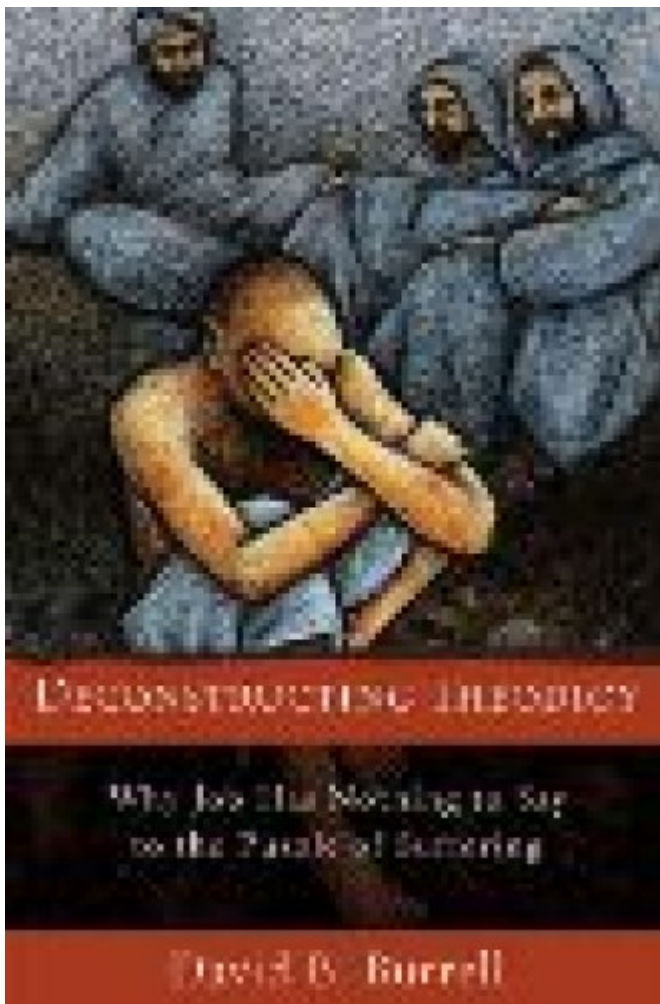


# Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering

reviewed by [Danielle Elizabeth Tumminio](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering

David B. Burrell

The problem of evil has plagued Christians for centuries. It has led Augustine to suggest the free-will defense, Hume to doubt God's existence, thoughtful Christians to question their faith and a host of philosophical theologians to develop various permutations allowing God to coexist with evil. But as Notre Dame professor and Catholic priest David Burrell recognizes, humans have never solved the problem of evil completely.

In working through the stalemated discussion, Burrell turns to perhaps the most famous tract on God and evil, the book of Job. He argues that when philosophical theologians focus on the question of why God allows evil, they not only mire themselves in hopeless logical conundrums, they do exactly what Job tells us to avoid.

Burrell opens more productive avenues for theological discussions of evil, using biblical, interreligious and philosophical tools. In his biblical exegesis of Job, he focuses on the conversation between the protagonist and his interlocutors and asserts that each friend represents a flawed ideological perspective with respect to theodicy. Eliphaz, the dogmatist, refutes Job's innocence; Bildad, the jurist, defends God's justice; and Zophar, the philosopher, asks how much knowledge of God is actually possible. In addition to these three characters is young Elihu, who demonstrates that youthfulness yields no deeper knowledge of God than experience does.

Burrell argues that the writer of Job set up a contrast between the interlocutors, who make assumptions on God's behalf, and Job, who speaks directly to God. The conversation among these characters illustrates the flawed ideologies of the interlocutors, showing that those who try too hard to "justify the ways of God to men" are often led astray. Thus Burrell uses the biblical text to critique philosophers who focus too much on why God allows evil.

One chapter of *Deconstructing Theodicy* is written by scholar of Islam Anthony Johns, who compares the biblical and Qur'anic Jobs. Johns analyzes the four pericopes concerning Ayyub—the Arabic name for Job—in great detail, providing the reader with an understanding of the themes and symbols in the passages. Of particular note is the contrast between the two longest *suras* (passages) in which Job is mentioned. The first highlights Job's patience as charism, while the second

emphasizes Job as a model believer whose salvation is predicated on his faith and his call to God in suffering. Feminists will be interested in the Qur'anic representation of Job's wife in the Surah Sad, which differs significantly from the biblical treatment of the character. While Job's wife is virtually ignored in the Judeo-Christian rendition, Satan tempts her in the Surah Sad. She, in turn, tempts Job, who sends her away and threatens her with a hundred lashes, which God later instructs him not to give.

Following Johns's chapter, Burrell presents an analysis of four classical commentaries on Job, by Saadiah, Maimonides, Aquinas and Gersonides, and two contemporary voices, those of Marilyn McCord Adams and Terrence Tilley. While a reader outside the field of philosophical theology may be challenged by these chapters, they offer a unique interreligious comparison.

Burrell closes by returning to the biblical text to drive home his point that the purpose of the book of Job is not to explain why God allows evil. Rather, "God's act of responding to Job mirrors the Creator's utterly spontaneous 'speaking' the universe 'in the beginning.' . . . And when one can address the creator-God and be answered, standard theodicy has a chance of being transformed." Thus, Burrell argues that the way God speaks to us, both directly and through our friends, is of paramount importance in evil's defeat.

In a powerful closing contrast with Augustine's *Confessions*, Burrell explains that Augustine's companions cultivate his relationship to God in a way that Job's do not. This may well be the most important part of the book, as it reminds the reader that Christians are to be patterned not after Job's interlocutors but after Augustine's friends, who make God known to those around them.

Though Burrell's short treatise is philosophically dense, it is a smorgasbord, with each chapter offering a new flavor to pique readers' interest—and this may leave them yearning to know more about each topic. Because it focuses not only on theological but also on philosophical and biblical issues, the text is an exemplar for interdisciplinary discussion. It will push Christians to look at the problem of evil with new eyes and will call them to be like Augustine's friends—a redemptive hope for the world.