

Job scrapes for answers (Job 1:1, 2:1-10)

It is as if every person who asks why bad things happen to good people takes a potsherd and starts scraping.

by [Jesper Svartvik](#)

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The Trial of God, Elie Wiesel's masterly and moving play on the problem of evil, is set in a Ukrainian village in the year 1649, in the aftermath of a pogrom.

The name of the village is Shamgorod, which in Hebrew means "there he scraped" (*sham garad*). The word *garad* occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible: in Job 2:8 it says that Job took a potsherd with which he *scraped* the sores he had from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. It is as if Job, the villagers in Shamgorod, and indeed every person who asks why bad things happen to good people takes a potsherd and starts scraping the surface on conventional answers to the problem of evil.

Reading Job offers at least two lingering insights. First, we rarely get the answers we feel we are entitled to in life. Second, it is Job, arguably one of the most forthright people in the Bible, who is commended for speaking the truth—not his friends, despite all their theological answers to the problem of evil.

Near the end of the book, God says to Job's friends, "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7). At least that is what it says in the New Revised Standard Version: "of me." However, the Hebrew text may be even bolder. *Of me* in Hebrew should be *'alay*, but here it is written *elay*, which is usually translated as *to me*. Job is praised not only for stating what is theoretically right

about God but more importantly for constantly directing his honest lament to God—for not saying one thing when he means something else.

In modern Hebrew, *garad* occurs in the word for “skyscraper”: *gored shechaqim*. The word means the same thing in French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, and many, many other languages: a building that is so tall that it is as if it *scrapes* the *sky*. One is reminded of two texts in the Bible: the first is the story of the Tower of Babel, “with its top in the heavens” (Gen 11:4), which in the Bible is not a positive example of a skyscraper. The other is the book of Job, in which Job thoroughly scrapes his skin and soul-searchingly scrutinizes destructive theologies of evil.

His endeavor is praiseworthy: he is a suffering person who is honest and directs his thoughts to God. I think of him as the positive example in the Bible of a sky-scraper: a person who reaches to the sky and touches the creator of heaven and earth.