

October 6, Ordinary 27B (Job 1:1, 2:1-10)

## **The primary biblical text that addresses human suffering is a comedic folktale. How are we meant to process this?**

by [Clint Schneklath](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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Does anyone think writing the book of Job was a good idea? Or that adding it to the biblical canon really helped solve the theodicy problem? Even if it is a literary masterpiece, at face value a story in which YHWH abandons the most honest, upright, and faithful man in the world to Satan's ministrations is a risky gambit. And if the entire gambit is simply a platform to explore matters of divine justice and assert God's bigness—while never providing a direct answer to the question of evil and suffering—is this really sacred text material? Or would it work better reformatted into a couple of entertaining episodes of *Good Omens*?

On my shelf is a mass-market copy of Robert Heinlein's 1984 novel *Job*. In it Alex, a Christian political analyst, endures a series of unfortunate events brought about by Loki (with God's permission, of course), the sci-fi element occurring as Alex shifts from one alternate reality to another, always at just the wrong time. Heinlein's novel is a tremendously witty and entertaining take on the misfortunes of Job, but it's the subtitle that has stuck with me: "A Comedy of Justice." Although the book of Job is an alternate reality consideration of God's justice, there's a not inconsequential aspect of it that is comedic, in the classic sense of the word. Misfortune after misfortune stacks up, not the least of which is the unrelenting cycle of speeches by Job's misunderstanding friends, and just like in any good comedy, in the end Job prospers more than he did before. All's well that ends well, right?

The book does introduce itself as a folktale: "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job." This introduction clues us into the book's nonliteral genre. The genre also forces certain motifs. It's set in a strange land, at a distant time, with a supernatural adversary. Good and evil are starkly contrasted and personified. In

the end a reversal of fortunes returns everything as it was. It is thus not out-of-bounds to prioritize homiletic attention to matters of genre. Given the nature of most of the other books collected in scripture, how are we intended to process a comedic folktale as the primary biblical text that addresses the matter of human suffering?

On a college trip to Israel in the 1990s, I decided as a creative writing exercise to compose a series of poems based on Job. I guess I fancied myself a poet of sorts, so each evening after bus rides to various ancient locales, comfortably back at the hotel and exhausted from archaeological explorations, I grappled with the long sections of the book devoted to the back-and-forth between Job and his friends. I would read and read, only partially comprehending, and then compose verses. I'll be honest and say I found much of Job tedious, far too long for my modern sensibilities. But I did squeeze some blood from the turnip, and our professor invited me to read those poems for the class. I'm not convinced the class was very happy with their professor's decision.

Those poems, which thankfully I did not retain and so will not inflict on you, were perhaps the most concrete attention I've ever given to the book of Job as a text. I still remember writing them and how earnest I was in the endeavor. I wish I had been less earnest. But since then, I've seldom preached on Job, and each time I read through the book and get to the end, I'm left with a general consternation.

Like Job, I think I'm supposed to say, "I've been spouting off about things I can't understand, so I now take back all that I said and repent in dust and ashes." But that's not how I really feel. My response is far more confused, and I continue with as many questions as Job had to begin with. Sandwich a dialogical theodicy in slices of folktale, including reference to monsters straight out of the Dungeons & Dragons *Monster Manual*, and I will find the whole thing curious, even entertaining, but not easily applicable.

Unless that's the point. That the matter of divine justice and human suffering deserves words but is intractably beyond words, in which case a folktale, a literary masterpiece, a comedy, a collection of too many words, will serve better than no words at all. And, if taken in a christological direction, this can stand as a troubling proto-theology of the cross as comedy, Job crucified just to the brink of death and suffering all the while, the whole of it revealed only to readers (but never to Job) as an incredibly extended joke.