



The book of Job as an example of method for theological thinking about issues

A personal reflection by [Ann Wansbrough](#) (March 1998, Revised May 1998)

Many people think that the way to deal with social issues is firstly to determine what the bible says, and then to "apply" it to modern issues. This is a deductive approach. There are three problems with a deductive method. I prefer a more circular method in which the bible and modern situations are brought into dialogue. I believe that such a method is itself biblical, and can be based on the book of Job.

I assume that people have read the book of Job. It's the story of a man whose piety and morality is impeccable. This is a man about whom even God boasts! Job and his friends share the same understanding of the religious tradition. It's simple really. Because God is just, the righteous are rewarded in this life, and the wicked are punished. Job and his friends share this common understanding of The Tradition. It's truth is evident in Job's own life. His wealth and family well-being match his piety and righteousness.

The Satan, however, is unimpressed with God's boast. He claims that Job's faith and morality is self-serving. God allows Job to be tested, by allowing his family to be killed and his flocks and herds and servants to be destroyed. At this point, it is obvious a literal interpretation of the book will not work. If the story is literally true, God is unjust and unloving, downright evil, since he has collaborated in the destruction of innocent people to prove an argument. Obviously the story is a literary device based on poetic licence, not literal or universal truth about God.

Job maintains his faith in the wake of the disastrous destruction of his family. So Satan demands the right to attack Job himself - in his own body. This is an extremely important point. Until his own body is no longer "whole" or "healthy", his belief in The Tradition is untouched by experience.

Even when Job's body is attacked, Job remains calm until his friends come. Then he expresses what in modern terms is readily identifiable as the grief process - anger, depression, and bargaining with God. He knows he is the same Job now as before, and draws the obvious conclusion: if he is righteous but suffers, God must be unjust. A just God, according to The Tradition, would still be rewarding him. This makes him angry.

The friends, like all good, pious people, are offended by his anger, and his attack on God. They agree about The Tradition, but draw different conclusions. A just God rewards the righteous. Job is suffering. Therefore, although they have absolutely no evidence of any wickedness or impiety prior to his suffering, they call on him to revise his ways, repent, turn again to God.

Since Job is who he has always been, and has done nothing wrong, he becomes more angry than his grief and sense of injustice have already made him. The debate escalates, with the dialogue of the friends providing unforgettable examples of how to damage people by incompetent, self-righteous "pastoral conversation".

The conversation goes from bad to worse as the cycles of dialogue proceed. Then the windbag Elihu turns up. He too believes unswervingly in The Tradition. He too proceeds to condemn Job without any concrete evidence for doing so, except that Job is suffering.

After all, it was obvious. The Tradition said so. If you suffer, you are wicked. A whole hideous stereotype could be imposed, simply on the evidence that one suffered. If one got angry about it, that simply proved one's wickedness.

Job is, however, still pious. He still retains some sort of hope in God and calls on God to answer him. God does so. He is not gentle with Job, but this needs to be understood in the context of wisdom literature. God challenges Job to a wisdom contest, perhaps the highest compliment God could pay a human being. Naturally God wins, but that is not the point. The real point is that Job acquires a new understanding. As Job experiences God and creation in a new way in the course of this contest, he discovers how small and silly The Tradition had been. Reward and punishment are not, and could not, be built into the universe. It does not work that way.

So Job discovers God is something far more, and the world operates in ways quite different, from what The Tradition had taught him. His knowledge of his own situation, and his maintenance of faith in the face of friends that claim he is unfaithful and sinful, allow him to enter into a dialogue with God that leads to a new understanding.

So Job repents of having spoken according to The Tradition when he really did not know what he was talking about. He recognises God as something larger than The Tradition.

God then asks him to pray for his friends. This puzzles some commentators. Why do they need prayer when they hold to The Tradition? The answer is obvious. Their problem is precisely that, in the face of reality that challenges The Tradition and shows it to be inadequate, they cling to The Tradition. In doing so, they do not care how much harm and suffering they cause Job. Their heresy and sin is that they absolutise The Tradition, and cling to it when ordinary human respect for Job would have led them to reconsider their theology. They idolised The Tradition above the truth about their friend. So Job has to pray for their forgiveness.

The very last verses of Job also perplex commentators. The most interesting bit, that the men tend to pass over lightly, is that when he has a new family, his daughters are treated as having equal inheritance rights with his sons. In other words, his understanding of justice has changed as his understanding of the tradition has changed. Morality has to be differently defined - not as observing all the religious rituals, but as treating all people as equal human beings.

In the book of Job, this rich dialogue between theology and reality requires changes in both. It is an example of a hermeneutic circle, where experience is allowed to lead to the questioning of ideas, leading to new experiences of God, new theological understandings and new ways of treating people. The linear, deductive model of The Tradition, and the friends, is shown to be inadequate.

The book of Job gives a clear warning. Orthodoxy which fails to learn from the uncomfortable reality which challenges stereotypes of God and human beings, becomes heterodoxy.

Hearing people's stories and understanding their situation and experience from their perspective is an essential part of reflecting on moral issues, whether personal or social.

Aboriginal people, people from other cultures, people who are unemployed, people with disabilities, people who experience racial discrimination, people of different sexuality, all need us to hear their stories before we determine what is appropriate action.

The book of Job gives us permission to reconsider our particular version of The Tradition in the light of their experience. God is more resilient, compassionate and accepting than The Tradition knows.

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