

GOD’S WAGER: A THEOLOGICAL-HOMILETIC READING OF JOB 1-2

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When engaging in the reading of scripture, especially for the eventual application of theological discourse, the student of scripture—whether that be a college student, small group leader, preacher or seminary professor—must approach the text in a specific, precise fashion. There is certainly a place for devotional reading, the first step in reading scripture. However, to remain at this step leaves the student of scripture spiritually stunted and theologically parched. To understand one’s claimed faith, one must be willing to engage it passionately as well as critically. This essay shares the conviction voiced by Michal Gorman, that “we can read a text responsibly” when “we pay careful attention to both the whole and the parts” of the text before us.¹ To that end, this essay will present a theological reading of a most troubled text—Job 1-2. This text is troubled not so much in its exegetical nature but in its theological meaning, which is often downplayed for more comfortable albeit inappropriate or incorrect readings. It will then present an argument for how to engage in theological discourse from this passage, including a sermon précis from the selected text.

Approaching the Text

Traditionally, the modern approach to biblical study has been known for being analytic, or critical. An analytical reading of the text, on one hand, focuses on the historic context of the text, which is also known as the diachronic approach. This approach seeks to ascertain what the original wording of the text was, what oral tradition gave birth to the written text or how the text was edited into its final form. An analytic reading of the text, on the other hand, can also focus

¹Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 8.

on the literary context of the text, which is also known as the synchronic approach. This approach seeks to ascertain the final form of the text through grammatical dissection, genre analysis or rhetorical criticism.

As fascinating as both these questions and their answers can be, they generally only resonate with a small and specific segment of the community of faith—the scholarly segment. This does not, in any way, diminish this segment’s connection to the community of faith or the need for excellent scholarship in preaching, teaching, liturgy and discipleship. However, an analytic approach rarely connects with those who are asking the postmodern question of why—those in the pews, in the classroom, around the hospital bed or in the prison cell. To respond to this theological need—dare we say the pastoral need—a more engaged approach is needed, one that takes seriously “the world that the text creates, or might create, and the interpreters’ role in that new creation.”² This engaged reading of scripture seeks personal investment, for the reader to see scripture as more than a theological artifact but as a liberating revelation that can lead to both a renovation of the heart and a long obedience in the same direction. This occurs by reading through the lenses of advocacy hermeneutics or cultural exegesis.

Engaged reading also occurs through what is called theological interpretation or theological exegesis. In this form of engaged reading, the goal is to bring the theological focus back onto the God who is witnessed to in the text. As Gorman notes, “It is not issue-centered but God-centered, and its primary context (without ignoring other contexts) is ecclesial: the people of God, or the church.”³ Sometimes referred to as a “confessional hermeneutic,” this approach seeks to read and understand scripture formatively, to understand not only *what* is believed but

²Ibid., 14.

³Ibid., 18.

also *why* it is believed. This approach is assuredly biblical and not wholly postmodern, in that a community reading the text theologically still assents to the authority of scripture rather than reading in a reader-response fashion. This is noted in an interest in canonical criticism in this approach, although this canonical criticism is more congregational—how scripture serves as the community’s “rule of faith” rather than the guiding text for an entire religious tradition.⁴ Thus the goal of reading theologically is to embody the text through a living exegesis, to move beyond pure scholarship toward maturing discipleship. It is this approach that will guide the remainder of this essay.

Engaging the Text

The text of Job 1-2, as it is presented to the reader in the English text, is presented as a short five-act drama, which falls nicely into the classic Freytag Pyramid.⁵ Developed by Gustav Freytag, a nineteenth-century German playwright, this narrative paradigm captures seven elements of plot within the traditional Shakespearean act structure, which allows for deeper character development and richer storytelling. These seven elements are Exposition (Act 1), Inciting Incident (Act 2), Rising Action and Climax (Act 3), Falling Action (Act 4), and Resolution and Denouement (Act 5).

For the purposes of this essay, the term “scene” will be used rather than “act” to maintain the integrity and brevity of the text. This also maintains the acceptance that the book known as

⁴Ibid., 19. For more on “congregational hermeneutics,” please see (in their order of publication) John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Preaching and Leadership Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), and Wesley O. Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster, 2005), as well as Ahmi Lee’s thorough critique of this approach in *Preaching God’s Grand Drama*, 55-86.

⁵John Yorke, *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Should Tell Them* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 36-37.

Job was composed in process and edited as a compilation over a long period of time.⁶ The book of Job becomes a text for all seasons as it lacks any social, political or economic markers, demonstrates a “complexity” in regards to the Hebrew language employed in the final product,⁷ and maintains a “dynamic” structure all the way through chapter 42.⁸ The “scenes” are as follows: Scene 1/Exposition (1:1-5), Scene 2/Inciting Incident (1:6-12), Scene 3/Rising Action (1:13-19) and Climax (1:20-22), Scene 4/Falling Action (2:1-6), and Scene 5/Resolution and Denouement (2:7-10).⁹

In Scene 1, the book’s Prologue (1:1-5), we are introduced to the character of Job, “a man in the land of Uz...[who] was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1).¹⁰ Job is both *tam* (“blameless”) and *yasar* (“upright”). In being *tam*, Job is a person of integrity, one whose character is defined by a devotion to *hokmah* (Proverbs 11:3). Also, *tam* is connected to *mispat*, as the one who is a person of integrity will practice justice (Micah 3:8-9). Additionally, the concept of *tam* is positioned as the theological opposite of “the wicked” (*rasa*) who are pronounced ‘*qs* (“proclaimed guilty”), a defense that Job uses for himself in 9:20-22. In being deemed “upright” (*yasar*), the narrator is stating that Job’s uprightness is ontological—a state of being, something Qohelet affirms: “See, this alone I have found, that God *made* human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes” (7:29, emphasis added).

⁶Kathleen M. O’Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, Message of Biblical Spirituality 5 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier Books/Liturgical Press, 1990), 86-88.

⁷John H. Walton, *Job*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 24.

⁸Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 199), 202.

⁹While this author is well-aware of Archibald MacLeish’s 1959 Pulitzer-winning play *J.B.*, this essay has striven to be composed independently from any influence. Any connections to the play are, therefore, incidental and entirely unintentional.

¹⁰Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, ©1989.

After being introduced to the character of Job, we receive exposition that confirms the narrator's monikers of *tam* and *yasar*: Job is wealthy beyond imagination. Through the listing of his numerous possessions, the reader is to understand that Job is "a paragon of devotion and integrity," and, therefore, lives an ideal life.¹¹ As will become clear below, the narrator is not offering exposition for the sake of exposition, like so many lazy screenwriters today. The narrator is employing foreshadowing, building a case that the reader must rationalize later in the narrative.

Job's "devotion and integrity" is quickly presented before the reader in that he engaged in daily worship, which would include early morning sacrifices on behalf of his children following their feasts at each other's homes (1:5). His concern is admirable: "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." And, yet, two questions linger just below the surface of this statement. First, why would the family feast be offensive to God? And, second, why would there be concern that such a pious family would curse God? The answer to these connected questions may be in Job's statement itself. Curiously, the narrator actually says that Job is concerned that his children have "blessed (*barak*) God in their hearts." How does this make any sense? The Hebrew word for "to curse" (*qll*) is missing here, leaving a generally positive word—*barak*—to carry a negative meaning. When speaking to, at, for or about God carries the concern of blasphemy. In commenting on the ordinance against blasphemy in Leviticus 24:10-16, Gerstenberger argues that "blasphemy" is connected to communal justice and carries a penalty of death in order to purge the sin from the community. To "curse" God can range from invoking God's name flippantly in an oath, using God's name in a hex or speaking

¹¹Walton, *Job*, 58.

disrespectfully of God.¹² The use, then, of *barak* is an editorial decision, much like the rabbinic tradition of how the writing of God's name was given special care by the scribal copyists.

In Scene 2 (1:6-12), the action shifts to the chamber of the divine council. The *bene ha elohim* ("sons of God;" 1:6; cf., Genesis 1:26, 3:22; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Psalm 82) march in procession and present themselves before the Divine Sovereign. This is not the place to have the conversation needed to fully impact this phrase and its significance on Hebrew cosmology. In short, this imagery is common in the literature of the Ancient Near East. However, whereas Israel's neighbors held to the polytheistic belief of a council of equal gods, Israel held to the monotheistic belief of a singular god surrounded by divine minions—only much more coherent and competent than those who surround Gru in the *Despicable Me* films.

As the *bene-ha-elohim* process in, one figure enters that seems to stand out from the others. Referred to as *ha-satan*, which means "adversary" or "challenger," this character has been referred to everything from the Prince of Darkness to a party-crasher who is trolling Job. This is the most revelatory instance of *ha-satan* in the Hebrew Scriptures. And, yet, it is still not fully nuanced. Walton notes, "The most initial observation is that every time this word occurs in Job, it is preceded by the definite article. This is strong evidence that *ha-satan* is not a personal name. . . [but] the office or function of one so designated."¹³ This reminds the reader that *satan* can actually serve as both a noun or a verb. On the one hand, it can mean "to oppose" or "to accuse," such as in Psalm 109:4: "In return for my love they accuse me,/even while I make prayer for them." On the other hand, it can be "the one who opposes" or "the one who accuses," such as in Psalm 109:6: "They say, 'Appoint a wicked man against him;/let an accuser stand on

¹²Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 360-366.

¹³Walton, *Job*, 65.

his right.” It should be noted here, however, that the use of *satan* in its noun form is almost exclusively reserved for divine beings. For example, the angel of YHWH who is sent to prevent Balaam from serving Balak is specifically identified as Balaam’s “adversary” (*satan*; Numbers 22:22).

A question that is at the heart of this scene is this: Is the function of *ha-satan* innately evil? This could be a theologically problematic question if a text from Matthew was under consideration. However, as the text under consideration is from Job, the narrator is allowed some literary liberty with how the character is presented. When called upon, *ha-satan* engages in a conversation about Job that seems morally neutral. In the question “Does Job fear God for nothing?,” *ha-satan* is challenging God’s “validity of a moral order” and not Job directly.¹⁴ In a surprise twist of theological discourse, *ha-satan* voices concern about the Principle of Divine Retribution, questioning whether God blesses based on human responses and reactions. *Ha-satan* doubts Job’s motivations, arguing that humanity will only be faithful to God as long as they are blessed. *Ha-satan* provides a contrast to Job’s private concern about his children with a public cursing, basing the supposition on experience with human nature. However, *ha-satan* is neither accusing God of being corrupt nor saying there will be delight in Job’s demise. The wager that God agrees to is whether Job will “be good for the sake of being good” or advocate his case to God.¹⁵

Scene 3 switches the plot back to the human realm and is filled with an unrelenting repetition of intense suffering (1:13-22). As Job looks out across his blessed domain, three trauma-suffering servants present Job with emotionally-debilitating news—in the space of just a few verses of text, Job loses his animals, his servants and his children. This scene is an “extreme

¹⁴Walton, *Job*, 67.

¹⁵Derek J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 35.

caricature of human loss.”¹⁶ All of this puts *ha-satan*’s challenge of whether one will retain their moral integrity in the face of such trauma squarely at the forefront of the book. Job’s response to losing his wealth is that it was God’s to give and to retrieve, this refuting *ha-satan*’s charge and, at least initially, validating God’s stake in the wager.

Scene 4 shifts back to the chamber of the Divine Council (2:1-6). The opening words of the text (2:1-3) are nearly identical linguistically to 1:7-8, with the notable exception being God’s ironic question of “Where from have you come” (2:2)? The use of “from where” (*hemizze*) indicates that this visit by *ha-satan* is a motivated visit, meaning that *ha-satan* has come from somewhere on purpose. God confronts *ha-satan* about the wager that they entered into through the explicit charge that God was “incited...against [Job], to destroy him for no reason” (2:3). This scene makes three important affirmations that should be noted here: First, God affirms that Job is righteous. Second, God affirms that *ha-satan* “incited” God against Job.¹⁷ And, third, God affirms that God “yielded to the Adversary’s provocations.”¹⁸ The wager, at this point, has been validated but at a cost.

Scene 5 shifts back to the human realm, as *ha-satan* once again “inflicted” suffering on Job and the reader sees how Job responds (2:7-10). Crafted as a type of parallelism to the scenes presented in 1:6-22, the narrator presents the gruesome reality of the divine wager—“Curse God, and die!” seems to be the only valid response. Again, the narrator uses *barak* (“to bless”) rather than *qll* (“to curse”), another ironic twist considering the narrator’s commitment to honor the name of God despite telling such a horrific tale. In one of the more grammatically and

¹⁶John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 20.

¹⁷This is the only reference in the entirety of the Hebrew scriptures of “God as the object of such incitement;” Samuel E. Balentine, *The Wisdom Literature*, Core Biblical Studies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 43.

¹⁸Ibid.

rhetorically deep texts in all of scripture, Job counters his wife’s nihilism with interrogatives—reflective questions—that reveal an even deeper level to Job’s “devotion and integrity.” The narrator has Job’s wife use the imperative form of both “to bless (curse)” and “to die,” thus further mounting the scandalous indictment of “moral deficiency” (*nebalah*; 2:10) against her. And with that, the lights go dark on the play as the curtain closes.¹⁹

At this point, we have engaged only in a reading of the text, examining the peculiarities that are intrinsic to this particular text. For this to truly be a theological reading, we must now determine how this text intersects with orthodox theology, missional hermeneutics and congregational formation. In this regard, this text proposes three theological tenants that should inform how this text is incorporated into the Church’s witness and practice through teaching and liturgy. First, this text affirms that God is the central character of the entire narrative that bears Job name, just as God is the main character of all of scripture. To this end, this text clearly indicates that Job is innocent of any sin and is in no way the subject of a trial. In truth, God’s character and implementation of the moral order *is* the subject of the trial.

Second, the text presents the question of why suffering happens as a hypothetical question. The question has been posed and the narrator responds with a story about a man named Job who suffered immensely at the hands of his God and *ha-satan*, God’s agent. The theological purpose is not to provide an articulation that explains *why* suffering happens but *how* it happened in one instance in order to invalidate the belief of divine retribution. The thinking, at least in places like contemporary Appalachia, circles around like this: If God blesses those who are good and curses those who are bad, then I must be good if I am healthy and my pantry is full. However, if I become ill, lose my job, get divorced or endure any other maladies, then God must

¹⁹An intentional decision to not include the introduction of the three friends has been made here, a decision that points to the significant conversations that begin in chapter 3 and continue until chapter 31, where the text tells us that the three friends “ceased to answer Job” and we are introduced to Elihu (32:1-6).

be trying to teach me something because yesterday I was a good person. The unfortunate outcome of this thinking is the descent into the nihilism of Job's wife when the cancer (or Covid) does not heal, unemployment becomes the norm, or the divorce turns ugly. This narrative is meant to refute the bad theology wrapped up in the Principle of Divine Retribution, not serve as a case study for how a singular individual should understand suffering.

Third, and along these lines, this text presents us with the question of what is God's role in Job's suffering. Although God allows *ha-satan* to inflict Job with a traumatic experience, Job does not renounce his faith and shake his fist toward heaven. In other words, *ha-satan* does not earn "a quick win."²⁰ Instead, in the text that follows (3:1-26), Job is provided with the space to offer a soliloquy that voices his confusion and claim to righteousness. Yet, this is only the view from the human realm, for Job is never given a reason for why he suffers. While Clines is correct that "the law of retribution has been broken" across the knee of this text,²¹ that is not the full purpose of this text. God's role must still be critiqued and evaluated. Or, perhaps, more to the point and more in line with the text, it is our own "casual theory of suffering" that must be critiqued and evaluated.²² In the end, we are left as Job is left—with no answers but with a decision of how we will respond to the suffering, a wager is a perpetual part of discipleship.

Proclaiming the Text

This essay now turns to the homiletic component of the proposed "theological-homiletic reading" of Job 1-2. As with the previous section, this section will articulate that preaching properly understood is not only about analysis but also about engagement. Specifically, as noted

²⁰Walton, *Job*, 106.

²¹D. J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, Word Biblical Commentary 17 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 43.

²²Kenneth Ngwa, "Did Job Suffering for Nothing? The Ethics of Piety, Presumption and the Reception of Disaster in the Prologue of Job," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 33 (March 2009): 359; see also, Martin A. Shields, "Malevolent or Mysterious? God's Character in the Prologue of Job," *Tyndale Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (2010): 268-269.

by David Schnasa Jacobsen, the Bishops Scholar in Homiletics at Boston University's School of Theology, "preaching is not about consuming theology, but a place where theology is 'done,' or produced."²³ In this way, preaching the theological operation of preaching is recast from a cognitive dissemination of propositions to a constructive dialogue of kerygmatic proclamation. Rather than continue the proliferation of compartmentalized theological conversations lodged in disjointed and disconnected loci, preaching rooted in homiletic theology seeks to bring all the conversations to the same table in an interdisciplinary construction of formative faith and practice.

In doing theology homiletically, the locus of theology shifts from the preacher's study where theology is conducted in isolation, to the congregation's sanctuary—however that is defined—where theology is conducted in conversation. As with a theological reading, a homiletic that is theological "speaks of God because it must" yet "also speaks of God in full awareness that it can never do true justice to its subject matter."²⁴ And while this may seem contrary to the role or nature of preaching in a traditional sense, this limiting nature of homiletic theology becomes a subversive strength in that it lacks the pretention of specificity. Still highly rhetorical and, thus, geared toward some form of persuasive outcome, homiletic theology channels the sermonic moment through conversation, what Bartow calls "homiletical (theological) criticism," where the preacher masterfully blends their academic training, pastoral practice and scholarly activity—all of which includes her or his theology of the Gospel, of

²³David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Introduction," in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, ed. David Schnasa Jacobsen, The Promise of Homiletical Theology Series 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 3.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

preaching, of liturgical context, of content and of method—into a theologically-reflective discourse delivered “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable” (2 Timothy 4:2).²⁵

A central theme that resonates through homiletic theology is that of hope, that eschatological looking ahead that anticipates the redemptive restoration of every facet of creation, what Moltmann referred to as the “believing hope”:

To believe does in fact mean to cross and transcend bounds, to be engaged in an exodus. Yet this does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities.... Faith does not overstep these realities into a heavenly utopia, does not dream itself into a reality of a different kind.... Faith binds [humanity] to Christ. Hope sets this faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ. Hope is therefore the “inseparable companion” of faith.²⁶

Sally Brown, the Elizabeth M Engle Professor of Preaching and Worship at Princeton Theological Seminary, is helpful in operationalizing Moltmann’s “theology of hope” concept. Brown reframes “hope” as a “stark and unflinching realism about both life-enhancing and life-denying dynamics present in” life that lead persons of faith to discern “the promises of God, kept and being kept in Jesus Christ...make all things news.”²⁷ This, then, becomes what Brown calls “promise-grounded hope,” a theological point of view that allows persons of faith to understand that “situations that seem to us utterly God-forsaken can be places of redemptive possibility.”²⁸ In doing so, Christians can take up a daring witness that proclaims hope and light in desperate and dark places.

One such model of homiletic theology that specifically channels Brown’s concept of “promise-grounded hope”—Paul Scott Wilson’s “four pages” model. This model is especially

²⁵Charles Bartow, “Homiletical (Theological) Criticism,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 154-157; see also, Jacobsen, “Introduction,” 9-14.

²⁶Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Grounds and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Reprint: 1967. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 19-20.

²⁷Sally A. Brown, *Sunday’s Sermon for Monday’s World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 71-72.

²⁸Ibid., 73.

suites as a vehicle for “promise-grounded hope” homiletic theology because Wilson’s model is both a theological model in and of itself as well as a sermonic model that moves along a rhetorical and theological progression that invites the congregation in a formative and constructive conversation:

Gospel needs definition. It is the saving action of God found anywhere in the Old Testament or the New, and is seen most clearly in life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the gift of his Spirit in the church. God saves, equips, empowers, and is the source of all that is good. The gospel is God’s action, though we have a role to play through our covenant with God. Gospel is experienced when the news is good, as is implied in the root meaning of evangelical, a source of joy and celebration each week.²⁹

Wilson’s homiletic model embodies his definition of gospel proclamation in his progression from “trouble” to “grace.” Following the introduction set in the contemporary world, which sets the tone for the sermon, “Page One” seeks to provide the theological focus of the sermon, what Wilson calls “trouble in the text.” In the case of our text of Job 1-2, the trouble in the text is that Job suffers as part of a wager between God and *ha-satan*.

“Page Two” shifts the focus to the contemporary realm, what Wilson calls “trouble in the world.” Rather than focusing on individualistic judgments or calling for imperative actions, this sermonic move seeks to globalize our spiritual trouble, to see the tension between God’s practice of justice and humanity’s practice of injustice. In the case of our text, the trouble in the world is that we often suffer without cause or recourse.

It is important at this point, as Frank A. Thomas reminds us, to not spend too much time in trouble.³⁰ If the point of preaching is to present the gospel as “promise-grounded hope,” then

²⁹Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 21-22.

³⁰Thomas actually refers to it as “giving too much bad news,” see Frank A. Thomas, “Five Preaching Mistakes—Mistake # 3,” <https://youtu.be/TUC3kXRygS8>; accessed 5 April 2021.

the majority of the sermon must focus on the final two pages.³¹ “Page Three” (what Wilson calls “grace in the text”), then, returns to the biblical world and provides a divine word of reconciliation, restoration or recompense. God acts or promises to act, period. In the case of our text, the grace in the text is actually two-fold in that God admits culpability of incitement in the afflicting of Job and that Job remains faithful in spite of suffering.

“Page Four” shifts back to the contemporary world, what Wilson calls “grace in the world.” However, there is no place for humanistic platitudes or hollow altar calls here. Instead, we find the emphasis on God acting, which leads to our pious response. The sermon concludes with a statement of mission, “one act of ministry that listeners might perform” or “an act of outreach that stands as a symbol of action the congregation could contemplate.”³² In the case of our text, the grace in the world would be to emulate Job’s response rather than seek to apply Job’s situation directly the one we are experiencing. In doing so, we follow the theological trajectory of theodicy to wisdom that runs through the entire narrative. The goal is not to apply Job’s situation to the contemporary situation but to see how one can respond to suffering in faith. This will, hopefully, be seen in the sermon précis that follows.

Introduction

The lights go down in the house as the stage curtain separates to reveal a lone performer on stage. Once the audience quiets down, a single, solitary light clicks on and illuminates the lone performer. He stands motionless, only peering out across the audience as if he were waiting for something from the back of the theatre to ignite him into action. Then, a rich, bass voice from an unseen performer fills every inch of the theatre as he speaks. As the unembodied voice narrates the story, the lone performer on stage pantomimes the action in exquisite and lock-step detail. The lone actor pantomimes actions of dealing in business, conversing with friends and

³¹See Wes Allen’s concern about Wilson’s model being “reductionist” and leading to a form of “triumphantalism” theology in *Determining the Form*, Elements of Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 51.

³²Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 56; see also Rob O’Lynn, “Crafting Sermon Applications that Stick,” in *Sermon Application*, 24-27 (www.preachingtoday.com/preaching-guides/sermon-application/crafting-sermon-applications-that-stick.html), accessed 5 April 2021.

engaging in worship. The narrated prologue ends with these words: “This is what [the man] always did” (Job 1:5). The stage fades to black as the lone performer exits stage right.

Page One—Trouble in the Text

When the stages light come back up, they come back up in full force. A throne room is revealed, draped in hues of gold, purple, blue and red. A massive throne sits in rear center, raised on an elevated platform and glistening in the light. Processions enter from each side of the stage and walk to their designated stations, forming a court for the still absent king. Among the court seems one who does not belong. While the others are dressed in robes that match the color scheme of the walls and floors—even the obvious commander of the army wears gold and red—this official is dressed in black and skulks to their position rather than glides across the floor like the others. The scuffing of their feet sounds like nails being scratched down a slate board. The others try to notice, however the wincing of those immediately around the dark figure betray both annoyance and trepidation.

With everyone in place, the herald announces the arrival of the king, the moment that everyone has been waiting for. The king marches with purpose and precision. He takes his place on his throne, quickly attended to by his chief advisor. As they converse, the king takes note of the dark figure. He is not afraid of this presence, nor is he surprised. “Where have you come from?” asks the king, to which the dark figure responds, “From going to and fro on the earth, and walking up and down on it” (Job 1:7). A conversation quickly ensues about Job, the man introduced at the beginning of the play. The king asks the dark figure if Job has been considered. Pulling down the hood to reveal a face and figure of haunting beauty, she seethes in a sultry tone, “Does Job fear [you] for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side” (Job 1:9-10a)? A shocked yet revered hush falls over the crowd. The plot thickens.

“What do you want?” the king bellows. “Simply to engage in a little wager, my lord,” comes the cool and calculated response. “I wager that if you strike Job, he will renounce his faith faster than a rebellious angel falls from heaven.” The look on the king’s face is one of agonizing contemplation. Every eye in the chamber is fixed tightly on the throne, waiting to hear the king’s response. *Surely he will not concede to inciting violence against one so faithful? She should be banished for her insolence! If I were—* “Very well. Do as you wish,” replies the downcast king. “Only,” he quickly retorts. “Only, do not touch him personally.” A sinister smile. A boastful bow. The lights go dark.

Page Two—Trouble in the World

Why do we suffer? The question has been posed and answered in so many ways so many times over. Some answer the question by saying that suffering is a result of sin. At times, this could be true, as when an immoral act produces consequences of tragic proportion. Some answer the question by saying that suffering is a result of forces connected to nature. At times, this could be true, as when a tornado destroys a school, lightning crashes a helicopter or a fire engulfs an entire state. Some answer the question by saying that suffering is a result of fate. At times, this could be true, as when a virus leaps through the ether from person to person infecting them for no obvious reason.

Why do we suffer? The question has been posed answered in so many ways so many times over. Some answer the question by saying that suffering is inflicted upon us by divine agents. At times this could be true, as when an offended ancestor causes a blight to ravage our family crops or when a deity snips a cord and ends a life. At other times this could be true, as when God is confronted by one of God's own agents and a wager is cast on whether we will remain faithful if inflicted with great suffering. It is, if we allow it to set with us, a terrifying thought. Yet, it is difficult to avoid when reading the story of Job. *Could this be how suffering happens?*

Page Three—Grace in the Text

When the lights come back up, they only come back up in a singular beam, once again on center stage where the character we now know as Job stands in complete disarray. He is weeping and disheveled, sitting on the ground. The narrator's voice once again channels through the theatre, narrating the tragic events that unfolded once the shadowy figure exits the throne chamber. Job's animals have been plundered, his servants have been murdered and his children have died in a tragic accident. He lifts his head and shakily says, "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" (1:21). Despite all that has occurred to him, these words of lament resemble the words of the psalmist:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are all your works; that I know very well (Psalm 139:13-14).

Despite all that has occurred to him, "Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing" (1:22).

These vibrations were lifted on the winds up to the throne chamber, where the king hears them. The dark figure returns again, seething even more than before. However, this time, less interested in squaring off against the king. Yet, the king is unwilling to let the matter pass away. He calls to the dark figure, "Why have you come back? Do you have more to report?" Gathering herself, she preens and responds, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it" (2:2). Falling back on his throne, the king retorts with a question about Job—and a charge of impropriety regarding the wager they agreed to: "For all you incited me to do, he still worships." "Then," the dark figure snaps, then gathering herself, "then, perhaps you should be brave enough to let me touch his body and then we will see how faithful he is." Again, in a surprising move, the king consents, convinced that his faithful servant will withstand the task that lies ahead.

Page Four—Grace in the World

Why do we suffer? The question has been posed answered in so many ways so many times over. Some answer that we suffer because God wants us to suffer. That would be a mistake. The story of Job and his suffering are not intended to be a universal answer to suffering, that God is responsible for all human suffering. It is, however, intended to be an answer to how persons of faith should respond to human suffering. Job, when confronted by his nihilistic wife, responds to her challenges with these words: "Shall we receive the good at the hands of God, and not receive the bad" (2:10)? And, in all of this, we see the grace—the hope—

of the text: “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (2:10). We see ourselves, our fears and our faith.

Conclusion

The Book of Job is a difficult text to preach from. To serve it up with a “once and for all” answer to why we suffer, is deeply troubling theologically because it counters all that the Bible speaks of about God. Yet, to ask ourselves “to find our place in the story of Job” is equally troubling theologically because it reeks of various forms of humanism, such as nihilism or atheism. The challenge is, therefore, not to divine an answer to why suffering happens but how we should respond to suffering. In the person of Job, we find one who holds a deep connection to God, a connection that has been enriched by years of intimate worship. This worship has cultivated into faithful trust based in the “promise-grounded hope” of accepting that God is good and just in all God’s ways. We do not see crippling fear here. We see emboldening hope.