Traumatizing Job

By Samuel E. Balentine*

ABSTRACT

Have the authors of the Book of Job traumatized this legendary character’s contribution to what scripture says about God by inserting the words “for no reason” (Job 2:3) into the narrative? Is the Book of Job in and of itself a traumatizing witness to what life in relation to God means when the dust settles and the final accounts are tallied? As far as I can see, both questions are legitimate and requisite; neither yields to simple “Yes” or “No” answers.

The notion of psychological trauma emerged in medical lexicons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, largely in connection with the mental breakdown of soldiers returning from World War I with what came to be described as “shell-shock.” Prolonged exposure to trench warfare fractured foundational beliefs (religious and otherwise) about the meaningfulness of the world. It forced ordinary persons to become philosophers and theologians. It reduced the language of those traumatized by “impacted grief” to one bewildered question, “Why?” Judith Herman offers a verbatim of the “crisis of faith” experienced by a combat veteran of the Vietnam War:

Trauma forces ordinary persons to become philosophers and theologians.

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I could not rationalize in my mind how God let good men die. I had gone to several . . . priests. I was sitting there with this one priest and said, “Father, I don’t understand this: How can God allow small children to be killed? What is this thing, this war, this bullshit? I got all these friends who are dead.” . . . That priest, he looked me in the eye and said, “I don’t know, son, I’ve never been in war.” I said, “I didn’t ask you about war, I asked you about God.”

Herman’s report of this conversation is revealing. It is the one outside the religious establishment who asks about God. It is the priest who speaks from inside this establishment who fails to understand that whatever wisdom he may impart about the world, about war, about life, his response will not be adequate without saying something about God.

The Old Testament’s Lexicon of Trauma

The Old Testament has its own lexicon of trauma. We find it primarily in Lamentations, Deutero-Isaiah, portions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and in a number of “Jerusalem lament” psalms (e.g., Pss 44, 69, 74, 79, 102, 137). When Judah “went away into exile” (586-538 BCE) as 2 Kgs 25:21 reports, the grand narrative that tracked Israel’s pre-exilic “history” with God—from the garden of Eden to the temple in Jerusalem—comes to a punctiliar end. When the dust clears enough for the historical record to continue, some fifty years later, the narrative will resume (in Ezra-Nehemiah and 1-2 Chronicles). In the interim between what was and what will be, the texts that claw for answers to Israel’s “Why?” question are these raw poetic articulations, a cacophony of words seeking a coherent narrative structure that no longer exists.

We may reflect on the intersection between this “Why?” question and its possible answers by considering William Gass’s “Exemplum.” God’s
primordial decision to "write the world," Gass suggests, presents an enormous challenge for those who would subsequently "exegete" God's script.

And God decided to write the world. He wrote the words \textit{round vast empty dark}. They made a line He liked. He wrote the word \textit{vast} in triplicate because He wanted the world to be very, very vast. He wrote the word \textit{empty} twice because He wanted the world to be mostly empty, so that one might turn tens of thousands of its pages and find them all blank and black. The word \textit{dark} He doubled for the same reason . . . . God appointed one \textit{vast} to accompany the darkness like a friend, and another to confront emptiness like an enemy, for what is it to be vast if your emptiness is for rent?

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
round vast empty dark
vast dark empty vast
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

[I]nstructed by the future, then, God wrote \textit{host of angelic scriveners} in His very long hand. Let them do the writing, which is damnably hard, God silently, inside Himself, said; I'll just publish. These were God's last words, even to Himself, since He wished to remain Omnipotent.

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
round vast empty dark
vast dark empty vast
host of angelic scriveners
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

God's last thought, however, was a bit of rearrangement.

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
round vast empty dark
host of angelic scriveners
vast dark empty vast
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

He wanted his writers to be in the thick of things.\footnote{2}
If God wanted writers “to be in the thick of things,” then surely the ancient scribes working during the years 586-538 were well placed, though not by choice, to do the “damnably hard” work of putting the proverbial pen to the paper. For all their different ways of responding to the post-586 crisis of faith, Israel’s “theologians of exile” return again and again to one common affirmation. The underlying answer to the question why Israel has experienced such brokenness and loss is human sin, not divine caprice. For the purpose of this essay, we may allow the word from God delivered by Ezekiel to speak for the whole: “They shall realize that it was not without cause [lo’ ‘el hinnám; literally, ‘not for no reason’] that I the LORD brought this evil upon them” (Ezek 6:10; cf.14:23). We should not be surprised that such an answer ricochets throughout Israel’s long years in exile, and far beyond, as those summoned to yield to its truth stumble toward comprehension. “Trauma,” as A. Berlin has noted, “takes time to find literary expression.”

“Have You Considered My Servant Job?”

With this in mind, I turn to the Book of Job, perhaps the quintessential text in the biblical lexicon of trauma. The dating of the book is notoriously difficult, and I will not enter into this debate here. Suffice it to say that the final form of the book (excepting the Elihu speeches in Job 32-37 and perhaps the Wisdom poem in Job 28) can be dated between the seventh and fifth centuries BCE. Though there are no concrete references to historical events, including no mention of the fall of the Jerusalem, we can be reasonably confident that the hard questions about the justice of God so acutely connected to this post-586 world are generative in Job as well. Moreover, there are clear affinities between Job and the texts mentioned above—Lamentations, Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the psalms of lament—especially in the poetic “middle” of the book (Job 3:1-42:6), which indicate that the Joban author(s) was deeply engaged with the same or at least a
very similar set of issues as these other poetic voices. Indeed, in most cases where the Joban poet appears to be in dialogue with these other exilic poets, he typically goes far beyond them, either by accentuating the grief and despair they express or by radicalizing the hope they envision.4

My focus here, however, is not on the unresolved poetic dialogue that rages at the center of the book but rather with the apparently settled narrative of the Prologue-Epilogue (Job 1-2; 42:7-17) that frames this debate, specifically the divine assertion recorded in Job 2:3:

The Lord said to the satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason (hinnām).

Inside the gap between Ezekiel’s affirmation that God’s punishment of sin is “not without cause” (Ezek 6:10; 14:23) and the Joban narrator’s affirmation that God can and does punish a righteous person like Job “without cause,” biblical exegetes are perforce dragged into the deep waters of what the Hebrew Bible has to say about trauma and theology.5

In what follows, I probe two simple but exacting exegetical questions that I believe we must address.6 First, what do these texts mean? When texts lacquered with authority affirm that God executes and/or sanctions the loss of life, possessions, and property both with and without cause, what does this mean for those who must respond with real-time commitments? Second, are these texts true? Whatever the meaning for ancient readers, is it true—not only then, but also now and always—that “evil” is an irremediable fact of creaturely existence in this world, whether one explains it as human failure or divine judgment?
What do these texts mean?

The first task is to ask what texts that describe God acting with or without cause mean. This requires that we temporarily bracket the question about whether what they mean is true, that is, whether what they say about God is theologically constructive or productive, in order to examine critically the essential givenness of the text. Three matters require attention: syntax, genre, and context.

The syntax of hinnaqm. The word order of Job 2:3 permits different interpretations. The location of hinnaqm at the end of the verse is typical, but in this instance it follows two verbal forms, “you incited me” (wattësitëni) and the infinitive construct, “to destroy him” (lëballë ’ô), which immediately precedes it. It is possible to take the adverb as modifying the first verb, in which case the sense would be that the sātān, not God, has acted “without cause” or “vainly,” because the test the sātān proposed has not produced the intended result. Such a reading is not impossible. But, even accepting that the adverb describes the futility of the sātān’s test, we still have to reckon with the admission, attributed here to God, that the sātān has successfully provoked God to afflict Job, something God presumably would not have considered doing on God’s own, which is the clear meaning of the phrase “you [sātān] incited me [God]?” It is also possible, and I would argue more likely, that hinnaqm modifies the infinitive construct, in which case the text conveys an admission from God that God has acted “to destroy” Job (literally, “to swallow him” [lëballë ’ô; cf. Prov 1:10-11] “for no reason.” That is, the emphasis is not on the futility of the sātān’s test but rather on God’s gratuitous treatment of Job. This “plain sense” of the verse, as jarring as it may be to our sensibilities, accords well with the two counter assertions in Ezek 6:10 and 14:23. There, God declares that God will punish Israel because of its sin, thus the exile is “not for no reason.” In Job 2:3, God declares, with apparent equanimity, that God has afflicted Job, who has not sinned, “for no reason.”
Genre. The Prologue exhibits the typical characteristics of a didactic tale. As Carol Newsom has perceptively argued, the rhetorical strategy of the Joban didactic tale creates a sharp tension with the strategy of the wisdom dialogue that is the generic template for the poetry in Job 3-27. The didactic tale prizes simple assertions, conceptual clarity, and monologic truth, as conveyed by the authoritative narrator who tells the story. The world works this way, the narrator says, and the implied reader of the story is expected to agree and to conform to unambiguous truths. The wisdom dialogue, by contrast, prizes argumentation, debate and dissension, and a skeptical, or at least critically inquisitive, response to monologic assertions of truth buttressed by hierarchical claims to privilege. The world in which we live defies certainty, the wisdom dialogue insists, truth resides in the contradictions between expectation and experience, and the implied reader is thereby instructed to adapt to a life defined more by irresolvable questions than predetermined answers.

Against the backdrop of these different rhetorical strategies, what are we to make of the Prologue’s assertion that God acts “for no reason”? It would be easy to dismiss this as a “superfluous detail” that has little effect on the larger truth towards which the Epilogue presses its readers. We might wonder, however, if this assertion, here cast as direct divine speech for the first and only time in Hebrew scripture, is not in fact the primary truth this didactic tale strives to make. The narrative that conveys the truth about God and the world has seemingly dead-ended with Israel’s exile. Inside this cul-de-sac, Israel’s prophets, priests, and sages offer a variety of responses, sometimes giving voice to anguished “Why?” questions, sometimes countering the questions with assurances that transcend them. These multiple voices continue to speak in the Book of Job; indeed, the poetic dialogues between Job and his friends provide a hyper example of the intertextual debate we see in Lamentations, Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. But if the final form of Job sustains this debate, it also locates it within a narrative that now includes a new wrinkle. The story that once insisted that God does not act “without cause” now resumes by turning the
complaint rumbling throughout the exile that God 
does act “without cause” into a truth that promises 
reward in exchange for surrender.

Context. The prose narrative commends Job’s 
patient endurance as the exemplary response God 
expects of those whose piety is tested by suffering. 
The test is posed in the satan’s question, “Will Job 
fear God for no reason?” (hinnaš; 1:9), which hints that the relationship 
between God and humans is essentially a calculated transaction. When God 
blesses humans with prosperity, humans bless God with faithful service in 
return. But do the terms of the transaction change when God’s blessings 
are not forthcoming, when, as in the exile, for example, life is measured out 
in social dislocation, physical affliction, and economic loss? Is complaint 
and protest a necessary or legitimate return for God’s apparent indifference 
to the terms of the relationship? The evident answer offered by the narrative 
is “No.”

There is widespread agreement that a later author found this answer 
unsatisfactory and spliced the narrative with the poetic dialogues, which 
offer alternative perspectives on how the faithful relate to God in times of 
crisis. I do not disagree with this assessment, but I question whether we 
have rightly understood the rhetorical role the Prologue now plays within 
the context of the final form of the book. My suspicion is that the “test” the 
narrative addresses is not (or not only) the satan’s question in 1:9 about 
disinterested human piety but God’s admission in 2:3 about the 
gratuitousness of divine justice. The words “for no reason,” previously 
implausible descriptors of divine justice, 
have now inched their way into a 
narrative that authorizes—and 
naturalizes—them as divine assertion. 
Once “for no reason” becomes part of the 
“authorized version” of the story, once it 
is asserted as a “simple truth” articulated 
with God’s moral authority, can there be 
any dissent, whether from the friends or 
Job, which can be commended as righteous?

The words “for no reason,” previously implausible descriptors of divine justice, 
have now inched their way into a narrative that authorizes—and naturalizes— 
them as divine assertion.
Are these texts true?

The second exegetical question asks how or if a text's essential meaning has import for the world in which we live, that is, if it is true in relation to what we already know or believe. We may evaluate a given truth as one that remains not only persuasive but also authoritative, in which case the text can either confirm or correct what we know or believe to be true. We may evaluate a text's given meaning as plausibly true and authoritative in its own context but not automatically or necessarily so in ours. In this case, what we know and believe to be true in our world may require that we reject what the text says is true in its world. In either case, the move from understanding what a text means to evaluating and/or appropriating its truth requires a procedural pause. Between analysis and advocacy, there must be a safe-zone where readers are free to ponder what texts require of them.

The syntax, genre, and context of Job 2:3 indicate that in the wake of the trauma of exile, the words “for no reason” found a place within one narrative that claimed to speak with authority about the truth of innocent suffering, from God's perspective. Is this assertion from and about God true? If the text actually says that God acts “for no reason,” is this a theologically constructive or productive assertion?

To get our bearings on the import of such questions, we might imagine ourselves into the role of the priest who sits before a trauma victim like the one Herman describes in the verbatim cited at the beginning of this essay. Better yet, we might imagine ourselves into the role of the narrator who turns to Job’s story in order to address those who have lived through the horrors of exile. What can we say about God, if the words “for no reason” are part of the scripture we have received?

Traumatizing Job

Is the declaration that God acts “for no reason” a traumatized concession to reality, a change forced upon the narrative by a truth that can no longer be erased or manipulated? Is the declaration that God acts “for no reason” a traumatized concession to reality, or does this text convey a traumatizing assertion?
Or, does this text convey a **traumatizing assertion**, a psychic shot across the bow of all would-be dissenters that is designed to shock them into (in)voluntary compliance? By juxtaposing these questions, I do not suggest that simple "Yes" or "No" answers will be adequate for either. As Barton has wisely cautioned, questions that presume only one answer tend to be no more than "pseudoquestions." I risk the following ruminations.

It seems to me that the shift from Ezekiel's "not for no reason" to the Prologue's "for no reason" could well be a **traumatized concession** to reality. Some experiences of brokenness and loss are simply too devastating, the wounds they open too gaping, the scars they leave too permanent. Existing narratives about what life can be or should be are no longer adequate to tell the story. Absent alteration, they remain authoritative and constructive only for those who have been spared the uninvited wisening that comes from what Tennyson calls the "Dirty Nurse" named "Experience." If our analysis is done, in fact, in a safe-zone, where we are free to contemplate all possibilities without restraint, then might it be that the "dirty nurse, Experience" vandalizes even the Creator, wrenching a concession to reality that was not part of God's primordial hopes and expectations for the world?

How might those who have walked in the footsteps of Job respond to the concession that reality is fungible; that trusted—even divine—truths can be traumatized, forced to bow before larger truths that were previously denied plausibility? Is the concession that God does what God does "for no reason" a truth that comforts because it affirms that life in relation to God is by necessity an ongoing negotiation with the implausible? It is not difficult to imagine that the Jobs of this world would say "Yes," if only because they could be assured that their traumatized truth about life and about God has a legitimate place in the lexicon of faith. It is also not difficult to imagine that the Jobs of this world, not to mention those who would be Job's friends and counselors, would wince at the concession that God does what God does "for no reason" a truth that comforts because it affirms that life in relation to God is by necessity an ongoing negotiation with the implausible?
concession that God is complicit in innocent misery, "for no reason." Once the boundary between the plausible and the implausible is breached, once the Creator of the world speaks the words "for no reason," is there any defense against the assault that claims victory by declaring that God is a non-factor in the outcome?

It seems to me that the declaration that God acts "for no reason" might also be a traumatizing assertion. Its rhetorical effect might be likened to the electric shock treatments used during World War I to treat "shell-shock" victims. After prolonged exposure to trench warfare, soldiers who returned home exhibited what the British psychiatrist Lewis Yealland described as the "hideous enemy of negativism." To correct their hysterical behavior, Yealland strapped patients into a chair and applied electric shocks to their throat. As that image begins to take shape in our mind, consider what Yealland was saying to the soldiers as the shocks were being applied: "You must behave as the hero I expect you to be . . . . A man who has gone through so many battles should have better control of himself." The objective of the treatment was to return the soldier to battle as soon as possible, which usually happened within a matter of weeks.

I do not wish to over analogize this method of treatment. But, if we read Job through the lens of trauma theory, it is hard to read the narrator's words in Job 2:10 (cf.1:22) without making a connection. After God speaks the words "for no reason" (Job 2:3), the narrator confirms that "In all this, Job did not sin with his lips."

Would trauma victims who have walked in Job's footsteps find comfort in God's assertion that there is "no reason" for what they have experienced? Would this be a theologically constructive truth? Would it help victims rebuild shattered values and beliefs? I can imagine that it might be a positive word, even if a traumatizing one, if only because it could address the "Why me?" question that typically dogs the victim. The "answer," such as it is, is that there is no reason that can be traced either to the person who has been traumatized or to the God who has permitted it, sanctioned it, or watched over it. Bad things happen to good people, for no reason. The route to recovery, therefore, will only be stymied by the search for a culprit. Best simply to treat the wound, then get up and return to the fray.
I can also imagine, and indeed think it far more likely, that trauma victims will not find the truth that God acts for no reason to be theologically constructive. Newsom has argued that the appeal of the didactic tale is also the basis for resistance to it. It offers parental assurance by “infantilizing the reader.”  

“For no reason” is, by God’s design, simply a part of life’s equation that those who are too immature to comprehend need not question. Not all readers are children, however, and the presumption that they cannot or should not make their own decisions about what to believe, say, or do in times of crisis is flawed. Newsom describes the reader’s instinctive resistance to the narrator’s assertion as follows: “[D]idactic literature provokes hostile responses from those who find in its excessively sheltered world of meaning the threat of perpetual moral immaturity.”  

Many readers, especially those seared by traumatic experiences, will decide that perpetual moral immaturity is too high a price to pay for the “psychic reassurance” promised in the Joban narrator’s words, “for no reason.”  

One further issue continues to press for a place in my ruminations on whether the words “for no reason” are a traumatized concession to reality or a traumatizing assertion that defies reality. Herman notes that studies of psychological trauma have both prospered and floundered in direct connection with political support or political indifference or opposition.  

It is not a new thing to recognize that all texts, including biblical texts, are forged in the crucible of political power. When we read a narrative that seeks to recruit its readers to certain beliefs and their consequent imperatives for shaping attitudes and behavior, we must ask whose political and ideological interests it is serving.  

For whom does the Joban narrator speak? When he asserts that God acts “for no reason,” does he speak for the religious establishment, for those who may be insulated from the trauma of life’s uncertainties by social standing and economic privilege? If so, then whatever authority the narrator claims, it must be credible in the face of those who are vulnerable to questions the narrator may understand only from a safe distance. Does the narrator speak with first hand knowledge of what it means to be vulnerable
to brokenness and loss that happens “for no reason”? If so, then he may speak more for those who have been traumatized by the religious establishment’s orthodoxy than for those who wish to defend it.

There are clues that the Book of Job emerges from and speaks for a learned scribal culture, one that enjoys the luxury of sophisticated analysis that is not disinterested in shoring up its privileges within power structures that may be under assault. I concede that the evidence that permits us to speak of the social location of the Joban author(s) is largely circumstantial. Nonetheless, there is an itching truth in William Gass’s observation that sacred texts “supply the illusions which suit the powers that be, and calm the fears of the general population.” In a certain sense, as Gass goes on to say, now focusing more directly on the authors of biblical texts, “that’s what theologians are for—[they are] the spin doctors of the sacred.”

Have the authors of the Book of Job traumatized this legendary character’s contribution to what scripture says about God by inserting the words “for no reason” into the narrative? Is the Book of Job in and of itself a traumatizing witness to what life in relation to God means when the dust settles and the final accounts are tallied? As far as I can see, both questions are legitimate and requisite; neither yields to simple “Yes” or “No” answers, at least none that either the ancient scriveners or we modern guardians of sacred texts have thus far crafted. In the end, there is this God who “decided to write the world,” and the legacy of this text, with the words “for no reason” now intractably etched into “the inky realm of the sacred.”

I conclude by returning one last time to Gass’s “Exemplum” on sacred texts:

Such goings-on, God thought, when only round dark vast empty were the four words written. Did no one find themselves troubled by the contradictions among all these truths . . . ?
God had created the scriveners for a not entirely laudable purpose. It made Him less responsible for all the divinely inspired balderdash they'd fill the earth with. . . . Not all these fellows had Chrysostom's golden throat. He thought about tossing the lot out of heaven and into some fiery pit, but then He remembered in time that there was no heaven in His system, only in theirs, and no Hell in His, either. Hell was their damn doing, as well. He could have cried *erase*, as He had considered crying earlier; however, He remained tied to His vow like a pony to a post, and docile and content in regard to Himself. So He spoke through the forks of the scriveners tongues and wrote them off. Go roast your toes in your own lies, He said, stroking the beard some said He had, letting the no-longer-holy host be swallowed in the fog of their own illusions. I'll catechize the four I can count on.

round
vast
empty
dark

The absence of some kind of punctuation that brings satisfying or authoritative closure to the sentence is intentional . . .


A few examples must suffice. Compare the way Job 16 pushes the lament described in Lam 3 toward a radically litigious demand for justice; the way Job 3 pushes the curses of Jer 20 toward a criminal indictment of God; the way Job 9-10 (cf. Job 13, 16, 19, 29-31) expands the legal metaphor in Jer 12:1-4 in order to bring a formal suit against God; the way Job's complaints about innocent suffering critique Deutero-Isaiah's commendation of vicarious suffering; and the way Job 7 subverts the conventional praise exemplified in Ps 8.

Space does not permit a lexical survey of the thirty-two occurrences in the Old Testament of the adverb hinnām, "needlessly, without purpose, for nothing." The most pertinent observation is this: of the thirty-two occurrences, only Ezek 6:10; 14:23, and Job 2:3 (cf. Job 9:17) use this word to describe actions of God that are "with" or "without cause." For further discussion, see S. E. Balentine, "For No Reason," Interpretation 57 (2003): 349-69; and Job (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 41-78.


The construction "incite against" (swt [hiphil] + bē) means to stir up someone to an action against another that would not have occurred without provocation (cf. 1 Sam 26:19; 2 Sam 24:1; Jer 43:3). Job 2:3 is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where this construction is used with God as the subject of the verbal action.


Newsom notes that didactic literature typically eliminates "superfluous details" that may distract from the message. "This impulse," she says, "is present to a remarkable degree in the prose tale of Job" (The Book of Job, 43). But, as she also acknowledges, "One must always keep in mind that stories participate in genres rather than being defined by them" (ibid., 38; emphasis added). I would argue that the words "for no reason" in Job 2:3 are one such example. Cf. D. J. A. Clines, who notes that hinnām, which occurs in Job 1:9, 2:3, 9:17, and 22:6, "is a leitmotif of the Job story" (Job 21-37 [WBC; Dallas: Word, 2006], 556), though he does not explain how or why.


Hysterical Disorders of Warfare (1918), cited in Herman, Trauma and Recovery, 21.


Newsom, The Book of Job, 45.
16 Ibid., 47.

17 Herman, Trauma and Recovery, 7-32.


19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 372, 374.