

Job and his "doctors": bedside wisdom in the book of Job

Ilan Kutz

The book of Job has traditionally been regarded as a philosophical or theological treatise on the nature of faith of a just man in an unjust world. Read by a modern clinician, the book becomes a treatise on adaptation to illness and loss, on doctor-patient relationships, and on the role of belief systems in the coping process.

Job's story

Job is a thriving livestock rancher, married, and the father of 10 children. Renowned for his piety, he is even praised by God in the angelic council. Satan, a sceptical archangel, offers an experiment to test whether Job's piety is really sincere or predicated on his God-given wealth. With God's permission, Satan sends a series of catastrophes, from economic disaster to the death of Job's children.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord," responds Job, adding, "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there" (Job 1:21). God scolds Satan for drawing him into a needless, brutal experiment, but Satan, an ardent methodologist, argues for a second experimental phase: "Skin covers skin! For all that a man has he will give for his life. But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face" (2:4-5). Here Satan outlines a hierarchical scale of human suffering in which the violation of the bodily envelope and physical injury are ultimately more demoralising than loss of property or even loved ones.

With God's permission Satan strikes Job with "evil boils," some excruciatingly excoriating skin disorder. Job's concerned wife urges him to break his silence and curse God, even at the risk of dying. Job refuses. Then, three of his friends arrive from afar to console him. So deformed is Job by tragedy and illness that the friends are rendered speechless themselves.

Adaptation and coping in Job's lament

Job's poetic lament begins with a cry of shock, denial, outrage, and despair: "Oh that the day had perished wherein I was born, and the night which said, there is a man child conceived" (3:2). He continues by describing his physical and mental anguish: "When I lie down, I say when shall I arise, and the night be gone. And I am full of tossing to and fro until the dawning of the day. My flesh is clothed with maggots, my skin is a clod of earth: it curdles and decays. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope" (7:4-6). He blames God for his illness: "He will multiply my wounds for no cause. He will not let me recover my breath, but fill me with bitterness" (9:17-18). Job provides one of the most vivid portrayals of nightmares: "When I say, my bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint; then thou dost scare me with dreams, and dost terrify me through visions: so that my soul chooses strangling, and death rather

Summary points

Viewed by a modern clinician, the book of Job unfolds as possibly the earliest description of patients and their healers struggling to cope with loss and illness

Job's lament contains all the recognised stages and elements of adaptation to calamity

Job's friends take on the role of healers, but, failing to recognise his needs, they blame their "patient" for his misfortunes and end up in a cycle of escalating empathic failure that renders them helpless

The failure experienced by Job's "healers" is not uncommon in modern doctors, who fail to recognise their own fear of helplessness and their own defensiveness

The assumed presence of a deity can provide coherence out of confusion for modern patients, believers and non-believers alike, and help them through the adaptation process, just as it did Job

The book of Job, like an ancient mirror, reflects both the frail and heroic features of humans, which have changed little through the ages

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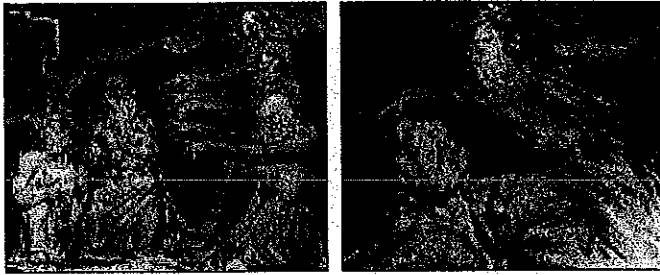
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than these my bones. I loathe it; I would not live always; let me alone for my days are hollowness" (7:13-16).

With time, Job shifts from physical anguish to defensive rage directed against the injustice of God and the obtuseness of his friends. Whether one considers that the stages of coping emerge in a certain order¹ or in a more unpredictable transition from one defence to another,^{2,3} it is clear that Job has moved from the initial stage of shock and anguish to one of confrontation, rage, and bargaining. Whether Job reprimands or begs forgiveness, despairs or yearns for hope and redemption, he is engaged in an adaptation struggle, the goal of which is the restoration of his sense of coherence.⁴ Finding coherence is an essential psychological manoeuvre which defends against arbitrariness and chaos, the ultimate form of annihilation.

The therapeutics of Job's friends

Job's friends assume the healer's role. They wish to reduce his suffering by espousing an age old moral-theological theory of illness containing both aetiology and cure. Illness emanates from sin, while symptoms are due to divine punishment. To deny wrongdoing is to obstruct the healing process. To get well, Job must repent. Yet Job's "healers" fail miserably. Rather than being supported, Job feels offended and



"Job rebuked by his friends" (left) and "The Lord answering Job out of the whirlwind" (right) by William Blake

betrayed by his friends' moral preaching. He retorts with a broadside of sarcasm: "No doubt that you are the people, and wisdom shall die with you, but I have understanding as well as you. I am not inferior to you" (12:1-2).

The more Job fails to accept his friends' moral reasoning, the more accusatory and vindictive they become, moving from gentle chiding to harsh accusations (fig 1). Job, in turn, accuses them of hypocrisy and double standards: "But you are forgers of lies, witch doctors the lot of you; O that you would altogether keep silent, and it shall be considered your wisdom" (13:4-5). The intervention has deteriorated into an escalating empathic failure. A fourth young comforter, who intervenes with sanctimonious accusations, only echoes his elders, proving again that excessive moralising and lack of empathy make poor medical intervention.

Both Job and his "healers" attribute Job's calamity to divine intervention. But, while Job experiences his disaster as a betrayal of his world of meaning, his friends cannot accept Job's interpretation, or even feelings, and need to reject it while tenaciously adhering to their moral belief system. They fail to recognise their own defensiveness, their own fear of losing meaning and their need to adopt rigid, moralistic dogma as a defensive mantle against their own despair. If such a disaster could befall Job, their equal or even their better, who can safeguard them from similar catastrophe? To feel safe they need to place Job on the other side of the morality fence. Job refuses to be quarantined in the sinners' ward, and, by authentically expressing his emotions, he exposes his healers' ineffectiveness: "So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes" (32:1).

The therapeutics of God speaking from the whirlwind

At this point of impasse, God appears from the whirlwind. Rather than addressing the origin of Job's calamity, God poses a list of rhetorical questions emphasising Job's ignorance of the awesome complexity of nature. Pounded into submission, Job relents and admits his ignorance: "I have heard of your presence with my ears, but now my eye has seen thee, wherefore I abhor myself, and repent is dust and ashes" (42:5-6).

While interpretations can be as diverse as personal belief systems, modern psychology and even theology can agree that the voice from within the divine whirlwind represents Job's inner voice rising from within his stormy being. William Blake illustrated this

by depicting God's face and figure as identical to those of Job himself (fig 2).

God's reply reflects Job's moment of transformation, the final stage of coping, the stage of acceptance. Job accepts his feeble insignificance when God intervenes, after he refused to accept it from his friends. It is God's personal presence that restores Job's confidence in divine order. Furthermore, unlike Job's friends, Job's God does not point a finger of blame. His message is that cosmic law and order are as intact as they are incomprehensible. Blame and guilt are left out of the equation.

Poetic justice ends this morality play with the restitution of Job's fortune and provision of a new family and with God's reproach to his friends: "My anger burns against thee, and against thy two friends, for you have not spoken truthfully to me, as my servant Job has" (42:7). The failed healers are now ordered to repent, apologise to Job, and pay the price of the animal sacrifice that Job will perform on their behalf. Thus, failures of doctor-patient relationships, according to the book of Job, can be seen as a form of ethical malpractice worthy of admonition and recompense.

Job in the haematology ward

"Man's extremity is God's opportunity," quotes William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,⁵ describing the turbulent psychological phenomena of revelation. Indeed, morality and religion play a part not only for ancient ailing believers but in the coping process of many modern patients. Over half of 50 agnostic men and women who had recently been informed that they had cancer responded with a moral or religious exclamation, such as, "What have I done to deserve this?" or "Why am I being punished?"

The following vignette illustrates this point. A 54 year old agnostic woman who had developed acute leukaemia went through an initial turbulent period of shock, denial, despair, and hope. Six weeks after hospitalisation, she developed severe complications to the aggressive chemotherapy. She spent most of her time in a darkened room "staring at the ceiling, and asking myself why I deserve this."

"Why, indeed, do you deserve this?" inquired the consulting psychiatrist.

"Somebody up there is testing me."

"Who is that somebody?"

"Who can it be? I have never been religious, but there's no doubt in my mind that somebody up there is testing me."

"Why should he test you?"

"Well, I have been through a lot in life, but it is probably not enough, because I have never encountered anything like this, and if I can prove I can withstand this, then I think he will let me live, because things can't get worse ... and he'll make me stronger."

She had never heard of the book of Job nor ever read the Bible. Yet, like Job, she had created a live *deus ex morbus*, a god out of illness. One could regard this god as part of the bargaining stage of coping.¹ Yet, here is a *de novo* creation of a divine entity that ensures that the world is not an arbitrary place—an authority is in charge and, if recognised and appealed to, can increase supplicants' chances of sanity and survival.

Helplessness and defensiveness in today's doctors

The sort of threat and helplessness experienced by Job's "healers" is frequently experienced, and almost as frequently denied, by modern physicians. Doctors are taught to manage illness effectively. Intractable illness provokes threatening helplessness. When patients express doubt, dissatisfaction, accusation, or ingratitude doctors may become harsh or even punitive.⁶

In an ongoing Balint group, a group designed to help family doctors understand their patients and mainly themselves, one doctor described how, to her surprise, she became short tempered and accusatory and even avoided encounters with a patient who had recently had metastatic disease diagnosed.⁷ While she could readily blame the patient for being "an ungrateful whiny nuisance," it was not easy for her to confront her own sense of profound helplessness with regard to the patient's relentless deterioration, one that threatened her grandiose professional identity. As with Job's friends, however, failure to address that sense of helplessness only increases the cycle of defensiveness and rage in the doctor.

Discussion

Doctors of various specialties have tried to identify specialty specific elements of pathology and wisdom in the book of Job.⁸⁻¹⁵ I view the book of Job as perhaps the earliest description of patients and healers struggling through the universal process of coping with loss and illness. Job's poetics contain modern elements and stages of adaptation to calamity. The responses of his healer friends are common in modern

doctors, who unknowingly defend themselves from being exposed to the same threat experienced by patients, the threat to the very structure of meaning and coherence. Job's religious experience may often appear at times of crisis in today's patients.

Viewing ancient Job from a modern perspective confirms that there is, indeed, "no new thing under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:8), at least with regard to people and their emotions. We can only marvel at the biblical mirror that still artfully reflects both the frail and heroic features of our essence.

All excerpts from the book of Job are from the Jerusalem Bible, translated from Hebrew to English. IK has made minor modifications in translation.

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Three incidents

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It's a funny thing how one remembers seemingly minor incidents many years after their occurrence, often relating them to events of a similar type. This, I suppose, is what makes up the fabric of life. These stories took place about ten years apart—yet they were simply new chapters in a continuing saga.

Something needing to be done

As I was walking down the corridor one day with my chief, we came upon a pool of brownish mucoid liquid on the floor, perhaps vomitus, incontinent stool, or some other body fluid. We paused for a moment, and Jack said, "Excuse me, I won't be long." He went to the men's room and returned with a handful of paper towels. With these he mopped up the offending liquid and looked at the floor. Not satisfied, he came back with another handful of towels soaked in water. He then wiped the floor and finally made a third trip to return with more towels to dry the area. Now satisfied, he just said, "Sorry to have kept you waiting," and we continued walking.

The incident made a deep impression on me then, as it does now. Most people would have located the nearest telephone and called housekeeping to clear the mess. And they would then, with an air of self satisfied righteousness, have continued on their way. Jack made no reference to this incident; indeed, I truly believe that he forgot about it the next minute. To him, something needed to be done and the simplest solution was to do it now.

Unlike Schweitzer

I rushed to the call room one day to find that the bed linen had not been changed, and that there were no fresh towels. Somewhat irritated, probably because it was my day on call, I telephoned the nursing supervisor and rather irately expressed my displeasure. A few minutes later, a middle aged gentleman dressed in an elegant suit knocked on my door. He introduced himself as the head of housekeeping. He apologised profusely, saying that the designated employee had called in sick unexpectedly. "Let's see what we can do,"

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