

Job's Lament, Benatar's Logic: Listening to the Polyphonic Text of the Book of Job

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Let the day perish in which I was born," Job cries out in poetry fueled by pain in his first speech in the book of Job (Job 3:3).¹ Job rails against every element of his birth, calling for the destruction of each one "because it did not shut the door of my mother's womb, and hide trouble from my eyes" (Job 3:10). Job's protest might be cast as a precursor of anti-natalist philosopher David Benatar, who argues against birth in general: "Being brought into existence is not a benefit but always a harm."² Such initial alignment between the protest of Job and the arguments of Benatar, however, throws into stark relief the difference of genre between the two discussions of suffering and pain. Benatar presents a carefully reasoned philosophical argument from a perspective that he asserts as universally true, while the core of the book of Job unfolds as a poetic dialogue among multiple characters, wrapped in a prose frame at odds with the concerns and the emotions of the poetic core. The book of Job dramatizes a polyphony of perspectives until that polyphony becomes central to the response to the problem of suffering, while Benatar defends his argument and dismisses others, until his transposition of the problem of suffering into the problem of existence comes across as a very solitary argument to defend.

The alignment between Job's first speech and Benatar's anti-natalism occurs despite significant differences between worldviews and contexts. The biblical book of Job presents God as both a topic of dialogue and as a dialogue partner (first as an absent one and then later as an uncomfortably present one), while Benatar explores the problem of human pain without theological concerns (except warning generally against the danger of indoctrination).³ Scholars debate the context and composition of the book of Job, as it is without clear historical markers such as the names of historical figures or places. The prologue presents itself as set in ancient times (although some argue that the prologue may be the most recent addition to the text), while the poetic dialogues at the center of the book seem to reflect the "world turned upside down" experience we see in other texts from the time after the collapse of Judah and the exile to Babylon.⁴ Benatar discourages his interlocutors from considering how his social and historical context

might shape his outlook; however, he too seems to be responding to a sense of overwhelming suffering, both human suffering and the human devastation to animals and the environment.⁵ Finally, Benatar's argument is clear, while the complex interaction of perspectives and genres in the book of Job have inspired a widely divergent range of interpretations.

In *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, Carol A. Newsom proposes that the difficulty of interpreting Job should be understood not as a flaw of the book, but instead as central to its goals: Newsom argues that the book of Job is a "polyphonic text," engaging a "dialogic sense of truth" without privileging one perspective in the text and without a clear closure.⁶ She contrasts this approach to a "monologic conception of truth," which she claims is characteristic of modern philosophical thought and modern thought in general. According to Newsom, this approach to truth is "essentially propositional," seeking unity and systematization, and is able to be "comprehended by a single consciousness."⁷ This description of a monologic text describes Benatar's approach to truth in a way he might embrace. Benatar evaluates human life in terms of pain and pleasure, arguing that avoiding pain is always a good, even if that means having no pleasure (such as due to not existing at all); he concludes that not being born is the best option because, although non-existence includes no pleasure (a neutral or "not bad" result), non-existence includes no pain (which is always a good outcome).⁸

In this paper, I put the multiple perspectives in the book of Job in dialogue with Benatar's argument. To that end, I begin with Job's own poetic protest, because it resonates most clearly with Benatar's own. I then consider the arguments against Job, first from Job's friends and then from God, and finally the prose conclusion that offers the clearest contrast to Benatar's argument, by presenting Job living a long life with his new family and new children. I argue that the book of Job, like Benatar, acknowledges that human suffering can be undeserved and unbearable, but that unlike Benatar, the book of Job nevertheless makes a subtle case for human connectedness and community—and thus for life and new birth.

Job's Protest

Job's speeches in the poetic dialogue appear to line up with Benatar's own argument. Job's first speech begins the poetic dialogue and marks the end of the prose frame. The character of Job shifts as the style of writing shifts. In the highly symmetrical prose frame, Job is introduced as "blameless and upright" (Job 1:1). As challenges are advanced against his character in this section, Job does not object. Problematically, Job's attitude in the

prose section is often all that people remember about Job's story, especially when Job responds to the devastation done to him with the famous statement, "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" (Job 1:21). This response is typically characterized as "the patience of Job." But only those who have not read the book of Job in full could mistake this statement of patience and acceptance as summarizing Job's response.

In chapter 3, Job casts aside all patience and acceptance as he cries out in poetry that he cannot bear his own life. In a series of overlapping images, he pleads for death. Job wants the day of his birth to die and the night of his conception to expire, as he laments that the only way for him to escape the trouble of this life would be never to exist at all (Job 3:3-9). Job in the poetic dialogue is Job the *impatient*. Job speaks as one who has already suffered without purpose for too long: "Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it does not come...? Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?" (Job 3:20-23). Job the patient and Job the impatient both use birth imagery, but to opposite effect. In the prologue, Job accepts his life as "naked"—without any claim to possessions, relationships, or happiness. Religious believers sometimes assume that such humility and obedience are the only correct attitude before God. Job the impatient, however, with his torrent of imaginative analogies and objections, offers an alternative way to relate to God, as he continues to cry out to God and seek connection with God, but as an angry lover might, full of anger and pain. Traditional religious believers within and beyond the text are often quite uncomfortable with Job the impatient and would prefer to silence his complaint, in order to insist that everything in the world is the way God wants it. Such religiously motivated refusal to acknowledge the pain of the world could be an element of the "indoctrination" Benatar warns against, but Job himself acknowledges the pain of the world and struggles to draw God's attention to it.

Rejecting Job's Protest

Job begins his protest as a protest to God, seeking a dialogue with God. Job's friends step in to defend God, arguing with Job in dialogue that evolves into attacking Job to defend God against Job's critique. Unlike Benatar, Job's speeches dramatize his subjectivity and his emotional reaction to his suffering that he does not deserve. Job cries out that he is not like a stone or bronze statue with no feeling, because he feels more pain than he can bear (Job 6:11-12). Job's experience compels him to protest that the

whole world no longer makes sense. In a world understood as created by God, when the world no longer makes sense, then God no longer makes sense. Job had once thought the world he lived in was safe—as if protected by fences (as the Satan claimed in Job 1:10)—but Job now finds himself in a world where the fences have come down (even his skin, the fence of his self, is now broken open) and he is not safe at all (Job 7:5). The God Job thought had protected and loved him seems, instead, to be attacking him.

Job's story demonstrates that, because his context has changed, so has his thinking. Unlike Job, Job's friends, do not experience any loss of property or bodily integrity, or any change in context, and they change nothing about their thinking. Even as they observe the terrible changes in Job's life, they refuse to change their thinking about God and the world, but turn to traditional responses and draw monologic conclusions. The friends are unwilling to try to think from Job's point of view because they are sure that they understand God and the world correctly and that anyone who disagrees with them—especially Job—is wrong. David Burrell emphasizes that Job continues to speak "to" God in the form of a relationship (even if a difficult relationship), while the friends only ever speak "about" God, as if they are sure that God is something they already completely understand.⁹

The interaction of the characters heightens the reader's awareness of the context and motive of the arguments. Job protests that his suffering is unbearable and makes no sense, but he argues because he wants God to hear him and vindicate him. For example, Job describes his pain as like an attack from his enemy, and he accuses God of behaving like his enemy (Job 16:12-14). Job cries out not just to get the pain to stop, but also to provoke God to respond. As Job's frustration grows towards the end of his speeches, his goals expand from his initial desire to prove his innocence into a growing desire to accuse God of injustice: "O that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!) O that I had the indictment written by my adversary!" (Job 31:35).

The friends seem to accept the necessity and justice of all the ways of the world. Accordingly, they direct their anger only at Job for speaking, and the only change they seek is to silence Job. Bildad, for example, asks Job, "How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind?" (Job 8:2). Eliphaz argues that Job's own words are the source of his destruction: "Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you" (Job 15:6). While the friends are accusing Job of making too much out of his subjective experience, they fail to notice that they are motivated by their own experience. Job suffers, and they do not. Job's worldview has been turned upside down, and the friends' worldview has not. The friends want to justify their own comfort and safety. They want to

insist that Job's suffering has a purpose, whether as punishment for sin, as the original three friends argue, or as encouragement to seek repentance, as the latecomer Elihu submits (Job 32:26).¹⁰ The friends are not objective interlocutors; they have a stake in Job's argument, because they want to trust that their own lack of suffering stems from God's good favor or reward, and they are afraid to think otherwise. Job's friends reject his appeal to his experience as evidence against a worldview that sees God's purpose in everything; instead, they double down on their appeals to the authority of inherited tradition. The friends insist that Job's suffering is deserved—Bildad argues that even Job's children deserved to die (Job 8:4), and Zophar suggests that Job's suffering is actually less than he deserves (Job 11:6).

Benatar and the character of Job in the poetic dialogue both make the case that pain can be too much, making some lives not worth living. Benatar makes a more complicated argument that being brought into existence is always a harm. Job does not extend the argument to this degree, though he does use his own experience of suffering to observe that unjust suffering is the experience of many. Job observes that the wicked seem free to do harm (Job 21:7-18), while the poor and the wounded are left to suffer without relief: "[The poor] go about naked, without clothing; though hungry, they carry the sheaves.... From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer" (Job 24:10-12). While one might be able to accept some pain and suffering if it served some purpose, Job's own experience of excessive and unjust suffering makes him aware of all the other cases where people suffer too much. Benatar argues more abstractly that the "absence of pain is good," and that even if pleasure is good, the "absence of pleasure is not bad."¹¹ He presents these claims as true for all persons, regardless of perspective or context, although he warns against "the cheerful" who might calculate the cost/benefit analysis incorrectly.¹²

With these arguments, both Job and Benatar seek to provoke. Job seeks to provoke God (and the text of Job seeks to provoke the reader), while Benatar seeks to provoke those who have not reflected seriously on the pain of human life and who continue to bring new lives into this world without reckoning the costs. As a character in a drama, Job is on display for the reader: the reader hears Job's impassioned argument; the reader knows Job's backstory as one who lost wealth, comfort, and divine favor; the reader pictures the Job who speaks as he lies in ashes with his skin covered in loathsome sores. The reader hears Job's argument, but also pictures his body and imagines his story; some readers respond with sympathy for Job—which describes my own response—while others seek to silence him much as his own friends do. Benatar, on the other hand, wants attention on the

logic of his argument, not on his person, circumstances, or motives. Benatar tends to address issues of perspective primarily to argue that the reasoning of those who argue against him has been distorted by *their* perspectives. For example, he submits that those with “appalling conditions,” like “diseases or disabilities,” who argue that they have adapted to these conditions so well that they prefer existence to non-existence are analogous to an enslaved person expressing enthusiasm for being enslaved.¹³ Benatar does not invite reflection on his own perspective, nor does he empathize with or take seriously the perspectives of those who disagree. Strangely, he argues against the objections of disabled people who say life is worth living by imagining an extra-terrestrial without pain or suffering, who looks down on our world to see “the disappointment, anguish, grief, pain, and suffering that mark every human life,” and suggesting that this being would correctly judge our human lives as worse than not existing at all, just as relatively healthy people “judge the existence of bedridden quadriplegics.”¹⁴ Even Benatar’s word choice here is hardly empathetic. Although at first Benatar’s argument might seem to align closely with Job’s own, his resistance to perspectives other than his own and his certitude about his own conclusions seems much more similar to Job’s friends. I find Benatar’s attempt to step out of the shaping power of human perspective unconvincing. Further, he seems less motivated by sympathy for those who suffer than he is anxious to silence their uncomfortable voices.

Responding to Job: “Who is this...?” (Job 38:2)

The dialogue between Job and the friends sets up two different opposing trials, depending on the perspective taken. From Job’s perspective, God is on trial for not treating Job justly and for all cases of undeserved or unjust human suffering; from the friends’ perspective, Job is on trial in order to expose his faults before God.¹⁵ Interpreters of the book of Job can fall into these two sides as well, as some read the text as concerned to defend God, whereas others read it as concerned to defend the suffering human being. Job’s defense of the suffering human being, framed as his theodicy question, is often brought into dialogue with contemporary histories of suffering. For example, protest atheists like Ernst Bloch and post-Shoah Christian theologians like Johann Baptist Metz engage Job’s questions to confront the devastation of the Holocaust,¹⁶ and liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez use Job’s concern for those who suffer unjustly to draw attention to the unjust suffering of the poor.¹⁷ A simplistic reading of the book of Job might assume that Job’s protest is reduced to insignificance by the response of God and the conclusion to the text. However, as Newsom

argues, neither the divine speeches in Job, nor the prose conclusion undermines the value of Job's own perspective.¹⁸

At first glance, the book of Job and Benatar might seem to diverge starkly when the prose frame returns and Job's possessions are not just restored but doubled (suggesting restitution for injustice) and Job has a new family and new children (Job 42:10-13). However, a careful reader must be uneasy with the prose conclusion. Despite Job's initial argument against birth and conception, the conclusion presents Job as having produced more children. Further, Job's first set of children remain dead, and the injustice of their death remains uncorrected. The poetic dialogue and the prose frame grate against each other. For example, in the poetic dialogue, God criticizes Job for speaking "without knowledge" (Job 38:2), but God's final words in the prose frame criticize the friends and praise Job, declaring that the friends "have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 46:7). Although Job's response to God is often read as repentant—"therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6)—some scholars argue that Job does not in fact repent, noting that the unusual grammatical forms render the translation ambiguous ("I despise myself," can be translated as "I yield," and "repent" translated as "comfort myself").¹⁹

God's final statement, criticizing the friends and praising Job, points back to the poetic dialogue and the way Job thoroughly examines his experience and keeps crying out to God, while Job's friends refuse to engage Job's questions and experience and refuse to change their thinking. Job wants to believe that God is good and just, but he confronts the reality that there seems to be no way to build fences around a life to keep it safe and happy and to keep out suffering and pain. Job's argument that God is cruel and unjust reflects this experience, but Job's goal is to provoke God to prove Godself otherwise.

Readers of the book of Job wait with Job for God to respond, but the divine speeches startle Job and reader alike. God responds with a long series of rhetorical questions that seem to emphasize the contrast between the greatness of God as creator and the insignificance of Job as a creature. The divine speeches do not address Job's specific questions or issues of human lives and justice at all. In contrast to Job's own speeches seeking to unravel his own birth and creation, the imagery of the divine speeches celebrates birth and creation. For example, God describes the birth of the sea as like clothing an infant, making "the clouds its garment, the darkness its swaddling band" (Job 38:9). While there is a beauty to the wildness in these speeches, the wildness is also frightening. For example, the description of the ostrich as one who "leaves its eggs to the earth...forgetting that a foot may crush them" (Job 39:14-15), seems coldhearted, but it also suggests

that the natural world can be a very difficult place even without the interference of humans. In the book of Job, the divine speeches celebrate creation in a perspective distant from human experience, observing a beautiful—but still often lonely and difficult—wildness throughout creation. Nevertheless, this “God’s-eye view” perspective in Job shows an admiration and passion for creation radically different from the dismay of Benatar’s non-suffering extra-terrestrial.

The book of Job also challenges its readers to decide how to respond to the text’s multiple perspectives. Is suffering like Job’s a reality to confront or a corrupted perspective to deny? As a theologian who recognizes the importance of context, I acknowledge that my own experience leads me to sympathize with Job: I agree with him that there is too much undeserved suffering in the world.²⁰ But the book of Job also expresses the desire to acknowledge this reality in community—to have God and one’s friends confront this terrible reality. From the prose ending of the text, the reader sees that, even after the suffering and tragedy of Job’s life and the long and painful conflict between Job and his friends, life continues, but with the community values reset. The friends who would not accept Job’s story now must take steps of reconciliation to rebuild the community with new attitudes (as signified by Job offering sacrifices for the friends and giving inheritances to his daughters). As difficult as his life and his community became, Job accepts life and community again. The ending in the prose frame does not remove or resolve the painful truths exposed in the poetic dialogue and also does not clearly answer the questions of what God is like or how the order of the world works. More fully, while the book of Job does unseat the theology of divine retribution preached by Job’s friends that holds that comfort and wealth are rewards for blameless and upright living and that all suffering is punishment or corrective for sin, it does not install a clear new theology in its place.

In the end, the book of Job and Benatar concur that there is no guaranteed way to avoid pain. In contrast with Benatar, however, the book of Job reminds readers of the value of the fences that protect daily living, including living together in community, listening to each other’s difficult perspectives and experiences, and trying to help those who suffer rather than judging them and increasing their pain. As sympathetic as Benatar may claim to be to the suffering of other people and other beings, I am not convinced he sufficiently questions the limits of his own perspective or sufficiently seeks to understand the perspectives of others. In this regard, Benatar aligns most closely with Job’s friends, who profess concern for others, but defend only their own point of view.

¹ All biblical citations come from Michael Coogan et al., ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

² David Benatar, “Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34/3 (1997): 345–355, at 345.

³ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁴ Mark W Bartusch, “The Formation of the Book of Job: The Priority of Poetry, the Primacy of Prose,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46/4 (2019): 36–41, at 37, 39.

⁵ Philippe Lynes, “Is It Ecologically Just to Be? Anti-Natalism in Eco-Deconstruction,” *Oxford Literary Review* 38/1 (2016): 99–126, at 117.

⁶ Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17, 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ Benatar, “Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence,” 345–346.

⁹ David B. Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 124.

¹⁰ Newsom considers the Elihu character to be a later addition to the text by an early reader eager to take a position in the dialogue. See Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 212.

¹¹ Benatar, “Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence,” 346.

¹² *Ibid.*, 345.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ A rich development of this argument can be found in Meira Kensky, *Trying Man, Trying God*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 289 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

¹⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, “Ernst Bloch im Spiegel eines theologisch-politischen Tagebuchs,” in *Unterbrechungen. Theologische-politische Perspektiven und Profile* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1981), 60.

¹⁷ See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 31–32.

¹⁸ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29; see for further commentary Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, p. 780.

²⁰ I discuss my own analysis of Job in detail in my paper “‘O That My Words Were Written Down!’ Contested Bodies and Unwelcome Words in the Book of Job and Modern Poetry of Disability,” forthcoming in *Horizons* 49 (December 2022).