

Job's Friends: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar

1) Ancient pagan religions prescribed three treatments for those in Job's condition:¹

- a) use **divination** to discern what you did wrong, or what your deity wants
- b) **exorcise** the evil afflicting you
- c) **appease** your god(s) by confessing a huge list of sins hoping to hit the right one(s) (as in 22:5-9)

Which treatment best describes Job's friends' advice to Job?

2) Job's friends articulate the "retribution principle" (RP), that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. This is a basic principle of wisdom literature as found in Proverbs as in this passage:

Crooked minds are an abomination to the Lord, but those of blameless ways are his delight. Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will escape.

(Prov 11:20-21; see also 16:5-7, 10:24-30, and countless other passages in Proverbs). On the corporate level, it is also a feature of the blessings of cures of the covenant (Deut 28). Can it really be true that Job's friends' advice is based on solid OT wisdom-literature principles?

- 3) *The Dictionary of the OT: Wisdom Literature* (337) says Job's friends are "advancing the case that the adversary [Satan] has asserted." How? Are they protecting Job or just their own view of God?
- 4) In Job's world there was little to no expectation of an afterlife. How could this, plus a belief in God's justice, drive one to believe in the RP? (Is this trap nullified by 21:19-21?)
- 5) According to scripture, natural consequences often provide the righteous with their reward in this life, and sinners with their comeuppance (Prov 11:22; 26:26-27). The Bible also allows that God is the one righting the scales (Job 9:22-24; Prov 24:10-14; Deut 28:20). And when Job complains that the wicked flourish (21:7, 23-26) he's complaining that God isn't intervening to stop them.

Do you believe:

- a) God, at least sometimes, punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous in this life
- b) God does *not* intervene to bring about justice in this life except through natural consequences
- c) God used to intervene, in the days of the Old Covenant, but doesn't any more
- d) God intervenes, but since we never know with certainty when, we must live as if he didn't

If you answered (a) can you name a time when you think it's possible that God brought down the haughty? If you answered (b), then what do you make of the verses which say God *does* intervene?

If you answered (c), how do you explain the fates of Ananias and Sapphira, Herod, Elymas the

¹ *Dictionary of the OT: Wisdom Literature*, p. 337.

magician, et al. in Acts? And if you answered (d) is your prayer life any different from that of those who answered (b) or (c)?

- 6) Psychologists researching “just-world theory” observe that humans instinctively believe the RP:

...when presented with a victim who suffered through little fault of her own (i.e., an innocent victim), people compensated the victim if they believed they could effectively do so. Thus, under these conditions, people appeared to react with a recognition of the unfairness of the situation and were motivated to respond with compassion. However, when presented with the same victim, along with the expectation that the victim may continue to suffer, people derogated the victim’s character, describing her in relatively more negative terms. The author [reviewing this research] interpreted both the helpful and the derogatory reaction to the innocent victim as resulting from a concern with justice.²

Barbara Brown Taylor sees the same natural response when we suffer:

As ancient as [the friends’] arguments are, they are as existential as they are theological. Even a toddler who bumps her head on the corner of a coffee table may ask her mother between sobs what she has done wrong. Because the pain hurts, *something* must be wrong. If she can discover the cause, then perhaps the pain will end. If she cannot end it herself, then she may still be able to seek the help of someone more powerful than she who can make the pain stop. If saying she is sorry will speed the process, then she will be all means say so. (*An Altar In the World*, 165)

The *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* suggests these reflect a biblical reality:

There is a pattern or structure in the world; it is not chaotic. There is a God, who is the supreme judge (Prov 5:8–16). He judges wisely (11:5–12), and so provides much-needed stability for humankind. Life can to some extent be foreseen; it is not true that anything can happen at any time, without consequences.

If it is both natural and even biblical to believe in a world which reflects God’s justice and order, what’s wrong with doing so? Given that none of us is a sinless sufferer, when *should* we look at our experiences through this lens, and search for the sins which might be contributing to our suffering?

- 7) Read the awesomely eerie 4:12-21. Why is Eliphaz so shaken? What would universal sinfulness mean to someone who holds to the RP?

Fun fact: “Babylonian and Assyrian writers of magical texts describe this same principle of retribution. But since they were not completely convinced of the justice of the gods, it was not as big a theological issue in Mesopotamia.” (*IVP Bible Background Commentary: OT*, Job 3:19)

² “Experimental Research on Just-World Theory: Problems, Developments and Future Challenges,” Carolyn Hafer and Laurent Begue, *Psychological Bulletin* **131**, 128-167 (2005).