

A Primitive Humanist in *The Holy Bible*: A Character Analysis of Job

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Abstract: Punished by God without conducting evil, Job becomes suspicious of theodicy. His attitudes towards the world, life and God have been subverted and rebuilt owing to his affliction. The changed outlooks confuse and torture him so that he keeps asking questions in order to figure out the reason and meaning of his own suffering, which shows his intelligence and sensibility as a human being. This makes him a remarkable literary image with a tint of humanistic color. Based on the close reading of *The Book of Job*, this paper analyzes the changes of Job's understanding of the world, life and God during his suffering. The paper comes to the conclusion that Job's examination of his inherent views in a period of upheaval in his life demonstrates the idea of humanism to some extent. However, as the ending of the story shows men have to rely on God for salvation, therefore "humanism" in a religious context has to compromise with the theological system. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that *The Book of Job* somewhat displays embryonic humanistic thought and Job can be regarded as a primitive humanist in the theological discourse.

Keywords: *The Holy Bible*; *The Book of Job*; Job; Character analysis; Humanist

Publication date: June 2021; **Online publication:** June 30, 2021

1. Introduction

In *The Book of Job*, the "perfect and upright" Job is punished without doing wrong. As a result, he suffers from excruciating pain not only physically, but also emotionally. Owing to the traumatic experience of losing his children, properties, social status and health, Job's attitudes towards the world, life and God have undergone a tremendous change. During his debate with his friends, it gradually occurs to Job that the world may not totally run according to God's will, that God is not necessarily purely just and that affairs and emotions concerning human are of equal importance as those concerning theological faith and matters.

2. Job Reevaluates the Reality

At the beginning, Job accepts the sudden tragedy happening to him quite submissively. After being deprived of all mundane properties, he tears his mantle and shaves his head and worships God humbly and enthusiastically by calling out that "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). In the face of personal loss, he doesn't appear to be a miserable man but rather a pious creature consumed by religious fanaticism. At this point, he hasn't realized his own dignity as a man of flesh and blood and considers God's deeds as absolute reasonable and just. His mind remains rather undisturbed because he is confident of the routine that "Job is God-fearing. God is Job-blessing. This relationship is a closed system...God...is a nurturing God of stability^[1]." However, he is enlightened soon by his own meditation and his debate with

his wife and the three friends. When his wife attempts to persuade him to give up his faith in God and to die in order to terminate the unbearable pain, Job replies that, “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). This rebut is not simply Job’s defense of God and his faith, but also indicates his awakening of the duality of God’s nature and the world’s essence. He is no longer a sheer unthinking religious man who drifts willingly and helplessly at the mercy of God, instead he is trying to understand the world dialectically and is eager to figure out the cause of his misfortune. Being suffering from the unexpected robbery and bereavement, Job comes to know the uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity of the world. To him the world now is not the same place as that God has created where everything is in perfect order as described in *The Book of Genesis*. The capricious nature of life reveals itself to Job in the sharp contrast between his life “in months past” and now. Job finally makes the conclusion that “When I looked for good, then evil came unto me: and when I waited for light, there came darkness” (Job 30:26). Upon gaining this insight, Job no longer views the world as safe and disciplined as before, for it is now a place where “I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard: I cry aloud, but there is no judgment” (Job 19:7) to him. This implies that Job, the spoiled lucky infant is forced to separate from the illusionary image of a motherly world and to become an independent grown-up who is challenged to face the cruel reality face to face on his own. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to define Job as an enlightened man who sees life’s impermanence beyond the limitation of the theological context and who is ready to deal with the pain and confusion his new knowledge has brought to him.

3. Job Inquires the Meaning of Life and Death

Painful and confused as he is, Job never ceases to inquire the cause of his fall and the meaning of his suffering and according to some theologians, what makes people unique is that we are able to find meaning in suffering. During the course of finding the answers to the above two questions, he doesn’t deny his own emotion and has no slightest intention to hide his changing opinion about God. From the perspective of Job’s three friends, it is venerable of Job to talk too much of his pain and it is arrogant of him to consider himself as “just,” because they hold the view that humans are born inferior to God and thus have to be ready to accept whatever fate God has planned for them. They expect Job to show a stoic kind of attitude towards his misfortune, but Job always insists on fully expressing and exploring his misery. He defends himself by saying: “Therefore I will not refrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 7:11). He does not deny his own venerability and gives full attention and respect to his own life and emotions. Viewed in this light, Job is an embodiment of the humanistic idea about one’s true self that “the realization that the socially imposed notions of their selves do not represent who and what people really are frees them to turn their attention to the submerged voices of their selves [2].” Job also has the intelligence and courage to ask God for the reason behind his punishment: “Do not condemn me; shew me wherefore thou contendest with me” (Job 10:2). Here his attitude towards God is reverent but by no means servile. At first, Job considers death as a convenient way to escape from suffering and then he complains God’s harshness on him. Now instead of cursing and complaining, he confirms that he has the right and ability to find out the truth about his own life. He seeks to build a conversation with God and this is his first attempt to find a rational solution to his pain. His personality has undergone a growth and his own value as a human being becomes clear to him. Confronted with his friends’ reproach, Job once becomes suspicious of his own innocence and righteousness, “And why dost thou not pardon my transgression, and take away mine iniquity?” (Job 7:21), “...but how should man be just with God?” (Job 9:2). Owing to the growing knowledge of his own value, Job later makes the decisive declaration that “...till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live” (Job 27:5-6). What’s more, Job cares not only about his own welfare but the destiny of human beings as a community. He observes that “One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at

ease and quiet” (Job 21:23) ...And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure” (Job 21:25). He evolves from a patriarch who scrupulously care for the religious ritual to a thinking person whose attention is devoted to the reality of human existence.

4. Job Challenges the Authority of God

Last but not least, the most turbulent transformation in Job’s life happens through his changed view about God. As the result of his tumbling down into such an abject state with no reason, the foundation of his faith, namely his belief in “theodicy,” is crushed. To Job, the world today is full of uncertainty and God is under suspicion of being incapable of differentiating between good and evil. Job employs a number of cases in which the wicked is blessed while the upright is doomed to express his indignation at God. He regards his suffering as God’s malicious persecution and accuses God by claiming that “For he breaketh me with a tempest, and multiplieth my wounds without cause. He will not suffer me to take my breath, but filleth me with bitterness” (Job 9:17-18). He never questions God’s almightiness, but his unconditioned faith in theodicy is subverted by the bleak reality. He even curses the day he was born and despises his own life, which is a bold behavior indicating his opinion that if God doesn’t treat human beings according to their morality, then the creation of them is meaningless and despicable since death is the shared destination for both the innocence and the evil. Tormented by the scorching pain, Job thinks of death as a solution to extricate himself from the trap of life. He calls for death only as a way to end his undeserved punishment at the very beginning, but much to readers’ surprise later Job should deem death as an escape from the chaotic world controlled by God. “Job announces his affliction as his opening battle cry against God, desiring to be separated from God in Sheol rather than be restored into fellowship with God ^[3].” As now for Job, death serves an asylum where “...thou shalt seek me in the morning, but I shall not be” (Job 7:21). Job’s suffering is so unbearable that he even expects a “redeemer” to revenge on God for him after his own death. Job realizes the power of death and by scrutinizing death he gains profounder insight into his life and suffering and he no longer worships God blindly.

5. Conclusion

Punished by God without conducting evil, Job becomes suspicious of theodicy. His attitudes towards the world, life and God have been subverted and rebuilt owing to his affliction. He comes to realize the capricious nature of the reality; he recognizes his own value as an independent and intelligent man and questions God’s deeds. All of these explicitly indicate that Job is a self-enlightened “humanist” in a primitive stage.

However, in a religious canon, the awakening of the spirit of humanism in Job has to make a compromise with the spirit of God. As shown in the text, Job debates with his friends on the reason and meaning of his suffering not in order to abandon his belief or to blaspheme God, but to gain consolation from their exhortation so that he can reconfirm his faith. Although Job has reflected a lot on his experiences, he never carries out any concrete deeds to save himself from the adversity. At the end of the story, he admits that he is vile and begs for God’s salvation. Job is a man who has the consciousness to review his situation and his faith but he cannot change the gospel that God only chooses to help those who believe in him.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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