

Job 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 3. After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, A man is conceived.

Let that day be darkness. May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it. Let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night, let thick darkness seize it. Let it not rejoice among the days of the year. Let it not come into the number of the months. Behold, let that night be barren. Let no joyful cry enter it. Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark.

Let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning, because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes. Why did I not die at birth? Come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts that I should nurse?

For then I would have lain down and been quiet. I would have slept. Then I would have been at rest. With kings and counsellors of the earth, who rebuilt ruins for themselves. Or with princes who had gold, who filled their houses with silver. Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light? There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners are at ease together. They hear not the voice of the taskmaster.

The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master. Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, who rejoice exceedingly, and are glad when they find the grave?

[1 : 5 7] Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet. I have no rest, but trouble comes.

There is a significant shift in genre and style between the prologue of Job and chapter 3. The characterisation of Job also seems to shift. The Job of the prologue responded to the great disasters that befell him with a determined faith and by blessing God. The Job of chapter 3, by apparent contrast, breaks out in an extended curse of the day of his birth. Besides this, we might expect to sense the dark shadow of the events of chapters 1 and 2 hanging over the rest of the chapters of the book prior to the epilogue. Yet, despite the fact that the Job of the dialogues that follow is clearly experiencing extreme suffering and distress, the shadow that rests over the text seems to have a rather different shape from the events of the first two chapters that we might presume to be casting it. The Job of the rest of the book doesn't seem simply to be bemoaning his physical distress or even his loss of his wealth and his family. Rather, Job's accusers and his social situation seem to loom much larger in the heart of the book than we might expect from an initial impression of the narrative of the prologue. What are we to make of this? Toby Sumter, exploring some thoughts by René Girard, observes that Job's statement at the end of chapter 3,

I am not at ease, nor am I quiet, I have no rest, but trouble comes, doesn't present Job's crisis merely as the devastating events of the past, nor even as his current distress, but as something very immediate and expected to increase. He argues that the part played by Job's friends within Job's crisis should be given more attention at the very outset. This might fit well with David Klein's argument that Job's friends, upon their arrival at the end of chapter 2, do not acknowledge Job, but act as if he were already dead. Job was the wealthiest and most powerful man of the east, who was a king among his people, but he has been brought very low and become like an outcast.

Perhaps his friends are swooping in like vultures, and Job's crisis, as Girard has claimed, has a lot to do with his attempt to resist their attempts to reduce him to a scapegoat, to cast him out for his supposed sins and usurp his position. Throughout the prologue, there was the prominent question of whether Job was going to curse God. Now, after seven days of his friend's silence with him, Job himself breaks the silence. He makes a curse in verses 1-10, followed by a lament in verses 11-26. Norman Harbell notes the structure of the passage.

There is a summary curse in verse 3, and the grounds for the curse given in verse 10. Verses 4-5 contain six curses upon the day of his birth. Verses 6-9 contain three sets of three curses on the night of his birth. The passage is a highly artistic work of poetry, with much development of imagery, wordplay, ambiguity and assonance in the speech. Harbell lists a number of these. The close similarities between Job chapter 3 verses 3-10 and Jeremiah chapter 20 verses 14-18 are widely recognised.

[5 : 20] The passage from Jeremiah reads, Cursed be the day on which I was born, the day when my mother bore me. Let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, a son is born to you, making him very glad.

Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity. Let him hear a cry in the morning, and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame? Like Jeremiah, Job curses the day of his birth, the announcement of the birth of a boy, wishes that his mother's womb had been blocked, and speaks of the trouble for which he was born. Michael Fishbane and Harbell both note the way that Job employs themes of cosmic decreation in this chapter. The creation began with the words, let there be light, but Job's statement is its opposite, let there be darkness. Allusions to Genesis chapters 1 and 2 pervade Job's statement, with references to the day and the light, night and darkness, days of the year, the sea monster Leviathan, and finally to Job's lack of rest in the concluding lament.

If the Job of the prologue might have appeared to be a stoic sufferer, able to withstand great hardship with remarkable equanimity, the Job of chapter 3 is quite different. He doesn't curse God, but he curses the next best thing, the day of his birth and perhaps also the night of his conception, and all associated with them. He summons the darkness of the formless void prior to the Lord's work of creation to swallow them up. He wishes, as it were, that the events that gave rise to his existence could be expunged from history, utterly reversed.

His curse invokes a sort of decreation, a let there be darkness uttered to the light. The darkness here represents nonexistence, death, and the underworld of the abyss. The darkness here is not just the regular darkness of the night, but the primordial darkness, a great void, a black hole, as it were, emptied of stars. Job summons all of these forces against the day of his birth.

The sea monster leviathan was regarded as a chaos creature in ancient Near Eastern mythology. It too is summoned by Job against the day of his birth. Harwell suggests that the reference to the doors of the womb in verse 10 might have an element of ambiguity, referring both to the womb of his human mother and to the womb of the earth more generally. The lament of Job from verse 11 to verse 26 begins with the summary question of why Job did not die at birth, a question that is refracted into a series of further questions in the verses that follow, leading up to verses 24 to 26, which lay out the ground for his lament. Job's great why questions in verses 12 to 23 are punctuated by presentations of the longed-for state of death, as a place of rest, as a release from trouble and suffering. The lament is in many respects a transposition of the curse into a different form.

[8 : 25] He is wishing that his existence had never come to be. In many ways this is a wish that is more radical than merely a wish for death. He is not just wishing to conclude his existence, but that his entire existence be erased, that it had never even come to be in the first place. The evils of his life are such that death here and now would not be sufficient to erase them. So much damage has already irreparably been done. Unravelling his entire existence is the only sufficient way to address the situation. He speaks of the grave as a place of rest. Perhaps he is inverting Sabbath themes here, as he continues to allude to the creation narrative. Such a way of speaking of death, as a place to be more desired than the land of the living, is startling indeed. Job is not unaware of the reality of death.

However, he now sees it as preferable to his current condition. Continued life is a situation of torment and bondage, into which he wishes he had never been plunged. For a person in Job's situation, life is a doomed and terrible struggle, to which the surrender of death would at least grant a measure of relief. While Job is not cursing God, his bitter curse and lament forcefully questions the providence of God in bringing him into existence. And, in verses 20-23, Job makes his questioning more general. Why does God bring any sufferer into existence, when they are doomed to such misery?

Job's concern here is not primarily the painfulness of suffering, so much as it is its meaninglessness. Life is like a grim labyrinth, with no clear path to follow. In the Lord's conversation with Satan, in chapter 1 verse 10, Satan had spoken of the Lord placing a hedge all around Job, protecting him from harm. In verse 23, however, Job speaks of the man whom God has hedged in. God is no longer his defender, but is like a besieging force surrounding him, tightening the noose. Job's worst apprehensions have befallen him. We might think back to Job's caution and concern in chapter 1, sacrificing for his children, lest they had cursed God in their hearts. Job had his worries and apprehensions then, although what is happening to him now greatly exceeds any of those. Job senses that there is even more trouble to come. A question to consider, how would you differentiate between the curse that Job does not make against God, and the curse that he makes against the day of his birth in this chapter?