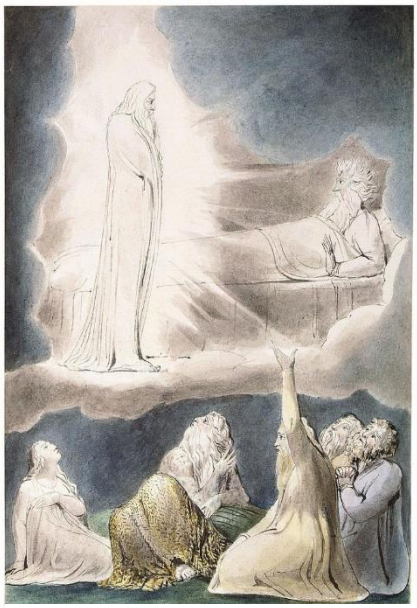
THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB
The First Cycle of Dialogues (4-14)

Job's bitter lament, though not directly addressed to his three friends, prompted responses. The responses become sharper as each friend takes up his explanation as to why this tragedy must have happened. In many ways, the explanations are conventional. While they will say many true things, indeed sufficiently so that St. Paul will quote one of them,[1] they will err at the heart of the issue, which is to say, they will argue that disaster is simply cause-and-effect. Job's protestations of innocence only push his friends further, and they seem altogether unwilling to accept the notion that Job's suffering is undeserved.

Eliphaz Speaks (4-5)

Eliphaz' first speech begins temperately enough if not wholly sympathetically (4:1-2). Like many, he seems to think that certain things "go without saying," but then he goes ahead says them anyway. We might categorize him as a moralist, the person for whom there is always a moral explanation and few, if any, gray areas. He begins with the reminder that in the past Job had been a comforter to many in their times of distress and perplexity (4:3-5).[2] Now, however, he charges Job with impatience and dismay, a man who has forgotten the advice he once gave to others. While he concedes, at least in theory, that Job may have been innocent (4:6),[3] he quickly jettisons this notion and asserts with confidence that tragedy is punitive (4:7). Indeed, any acknowledgement that Job is an innocent sufferer seems, in the mouth of Eliphaz, to be tinged with irony if not outright sarcasm (cf. 22:2ff.). He continues his conventional wisdom, pointing out that trouble-makers get their just deserts under the lion-like justice of Almighty God (4:8-11). The problem with conventional wisdom, however, is that while it may be generally true, it may completely miss what is true in any particular case. In this case, it was *not* true, and God himself will say so in the end of the book.



Eliphaz' vision with ghosts and whispers, "Shall mortal man be more just than God?"
Watercolor by William Blake

Eliphaz' wisdom is what might be called cliché wisdom. Perhaps Eliphaz realized that his conventional wisdom needed some propping up, so what it lacked in substance he now tries to make up for by appealing to mystical experience. His revelatory dream, despite all the introductory titillating eeriness of ghosts and whispers in the dark (4:12-16), ends up being banal. The message he heard is true enough—mortals cannot hope to be more righteous than God—but it is hardly

[1] 1 Co. 3:19//Job 5:13
[2] For Job's own account of his role as an advisor to others, see 29:7-25.
[3] The Hebrew text reads, "Is not your fear your confidence?" and the ESV and other versions appropriately expand the phrase to "fear [of God]", since Job's piety is clearly in view.

helpful, unless he intends to imply that Job has considered himself more righteous than God (4:17). Such a question with its implied accusation is surely unfair! What mortal man would ever have thought that he could be purer than God? The only one to disagree would be the person whose hubris knows no bounds at all! Job certainly has said nothing to merit such an aspersion!

There may a hint, here, of the fall of the angels (4:18). If God does not trust angels to be perfect, then he would trust even less mere mortal humans in their "houses of clay" (4:19a). Before God, humans are about as significant as moths, and they die without meaning (4:19b-21). Here, Eliphaz comes close to the fatalistic sentiments of the existentialist Jean Paul-Sartre, "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance."

Even should Job appeal to the angels ("holy ones"), it would be an exercise in futility, and in any case, Eliphaz seems to think Job has disqualified himself (5:1), for as he later implies, Job has "despised the discipline of God" (5:17). For Eliphaz, disaster is a product of cause-and-effect, plain and simple. This is especially exemplified in the life of the fool, who by his indignation and passion puts his whole family at risk and whom Eliphaz does not hesitate to curse (5:2-4). Human troubles, accordingly to Eliphaz, are engendered by humans themselves, and such deserved reprisals are as inevitable as sparks that fly upward from a campfire (5:5-7).

Is there a solution? Eliphaz argues, correctly enough, that only God can reverse misfortune. Certainly, this is true as it stands. However, Eliphaz goes further in urging that in seeking the Almighty, who accomplishes his divine purposes through forces of nature and in spite of human machinations (5:8-16), Job needs to realize that his trial is one of divine chastening and disciplinary action (5:17). If Job will only admit his sins, all will be well! He will be healed (5:18), delivered (5:19), redeemed (5:20), protected (5:21), preserved (5:22), secured (5:23), fulfilled (5:24), blessed with additional children (5:25), and healthy (5:26)! The reference to more children is particularly stinging. To talk of more children to a man who is still grieving over the horrific loss of his own children is heartless to the core. This is not comfort; it is cruelty. To add insult to the cruelty that marks this patronizing wisdom, Eliphaz closes with an exaltation of his own ingenuity (5:27). Using the royal "we" (by which he includes himself among the sages of the ages), he urges that Job needs only to apply such wisdom to himself. How delightfully comforting! Rest easy, Job, you miserable cur, you sinner! You deserve this! Just confess your moral shortfall, and you can be happy again!

THE INSULT

What makes Eliphaz words in chaps. 4-5 so deeply offensive, as scholar Carol Newsom has pointed out, is not that they [the friends] attempt to integrate suffering into a context of meaning but that they reflect the attempt of someone who is not suffering to silence the "unacceptable" words of one who is.

Job Responds (6-7)

Eliphaz has done his best with conventional wisdom. Job, however, knows in his bones that this is not the right answer. Eliphaz' words are like a cold slap in the face, the insinuation that if Job will just admit his sins, everything will come right. This is precisely what Job cannot do and remain honest. To knuckle under to such speculation would be hypocritical, and Job, whatever else he might be, is not about to start being dishonest. All he wants, at this point, is for someone to understand his experience. He often talks to himself as much as to his friends, struggling with the

issue in his own mind.

Condemnation by insinuation is devious and disingenuous, since it implies guilt while making no direct charge. This was the character of Eliphaz' discourse, and in response, Job simply moans that his suffering is unbearable. If it could be weighed, it would be beyond calculation (6:1-3a). If Job's opening complaint seemed rash, he had good reason (6:3b-5)! Both Eliphaz and Job agree that Job's misfortune in some sense has come from God, but they disagree emphatically over the human capacity to explain it: for Eliphaz, all is explainable, but for Job, all is mystery and uncertainty. Eliphaz's explanation, at least as far as Job was concerned, was as empty as tasteless food (6:6-7)! Hence, Job wishes he could simply die. Again, Job is not entertaining escape by suicide, but still, if God would only grant his hope, he would prefer to die (6:8-10a).

At last, Job says something directly to his friends. Of course, only one friend so far has spoken, but Eliphaz has deigned to speak for them all, so Job responds to his "brothers." Even if they thought he had abandoned God, they still should have shown pity, not recrimination (6:14). His friends were like a desert wadi whose streams fail in the dry season (6:15). They were like melting snow or caravans that lose their way in the desert (6:16-18). They were as ephemeral as travelers that never show up, a shameful disappointment (6:19-20). They were cowardly in their smug advice (1:21)!

Going on the offensive, Job now poses a series of searching questions. Eliphaz had insinuated that Job had somehow sinned. But if so, in what way? Job demands that Eliphaz be specific. He asks, "Have I ever asked for a bribe" (6:22)? "Have I ever pled for a ransom from kidnappers" (6:23)? In other words, have I ever made any demands of you at all? Such rhetorical questions are posed in sarcasm. If his friends thought there was some fault on Job's part, out with it! Straight talk is helpful, and if his friends had something specific and constructive to offer, even if it concerned inadvertent failures, Job would quietly listen! But callous insinuations were empty and heartless (6:24-26)! If they could cast aspersions, so could Job, and now he does so with his stinging, "You would gamble over orphans and barter over your friend" (6:27)!

Job now takes oath that he is telling the truth when he protests his innocence.[4] In a series of imperatives, he challenges his friends to face him, to stop assuming his guilt and to reconsider (6:28-30)! His very integrity was at stake. Job was quite capable of discerning falsehood, even in himself (here using the metaphor of taste to describe such ability). He was quite able to "taste" his own circumstance and determine whether the cause of his calamity was his own fault.

Now, in almost an aside, Job reflects on the hardness of life. His days are like serving as a mercenary or a hired worker or slave, laborers who long for evening when they can finally take their wages and quit for the day (7:1-2). But night was hardly a reprieve. Month and after month he struggled through the nights, tossing and turning in the midst of erupting pustules and maggots in his skin, making sleep nearly impossible (7:3-5). The nights dragged on while he moaned over life's brevity, which is like a weaver's shuttle when the thread runs out (7:6, cf. NEB).

[4] The use of אִם in 6:28 (if I am a liar) and 6:30 (if my mouth cannot discern) is an oath formula and carries a negative force (i.e., "I swear that I'm not lying!"), cf. T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribners, 1971), p.172.

In 7:6, Job now begins to address God directly. His imperative, "Remember that my life is a breath..." is probably not an address to his friends, but rather, to the One who had given him the breath of life (cf. Ge. 2:7). One must bear in mind, of course, that Job's thought is much earlier than the theology of hope embodied in the Christian expectation of resurrection. It is not so much that Job rejects resurrection, but that he does not even know about it. His hope for a meeting with God after death will eventually be expressed (cf. 19:24-27), but at this point he only speaks in the general terms of his times, where death and the entry to *Sheol*, the place of the dead, are the only known realities (7:8-10).

THE PLACE OF THE DEAD

In the Old Testament, the realm of death is depicted as a shadowy existence in Sheol (= the underworld, abode of the dead). Those who die descend to some region of confinement, where they join their ancestors (cf. Ge. 15:15; 35:29). It is the destiny of all living persons (Job 30:23), sometimes metaphorically described as a walled city with "gates" (Job 38:17; Is. 38:10; cf. Mt. 16:18). It is a place characterized by silence (Ps. 94:17; 115:17) and gloom (Job 10:21-22; Ps. 143:3; La. 3:6). In contrast to the turbulence of the living world, it also can be a place of rest (Job 3:16-19). Those who exist in this realm sometimes are called rephaim, that is, ghosts or shades (Job 26:5; Ps. 88:10; Pro. 9:18; 21:16; Is. 14:9; 26:14). Here, they no longer are able to praise God as do the living (Ps. 6:5; 88:12; 115:17-18).

Job has reached an extremity where he is bold to speak of his misery, even to God (7:11). The bluntness of his words might lead one to assume a tone of belligerence, and some interpreters take it in this way, but I am more inclined to the opinion that his words should be read with a tone of bewilderment. He cannot understand how the God he has come to love has allowed this tragedy to happen. As such, his questions are not expressions of insolence, but rather, sobs of confusion. So, he asks, "Am I *Yam* or even *Tannin* that you should put on me a guard" (7:12)? He laments, "I am miserable all night long, because even in my restless sleep I am terrified with nightmares, so much so, that I would rather die" (7:13-16).

NAMES OF CHAOS CREATURES

The names Yam and Tannin are well-known names of fearful mythological creatures from ancient Near Eastern culture, and the fact that they appear as proper names suggests that Job has in mind these personalized monsters of chaos (contra the KJV, which renders them simply as "the sea" and "a whale"). The NRSV's "the Sea" or "the Dragon" is a more appropriate rendering. That Job might allude to a false deity by way of illustration in no way suggests that he believes in them any more than St. Paul believes in the Greek pantheon when he quotes from a poem about Zeus in the New Testament (cf. Act. 17:28). Allusions are just that—allusions—not confessions of faith.

Job had no illusions of personal moral perfection, however. Though Eliphaz insinuated that Job had sinned and his sin had resulted in divine punitive action, and though Job had denied that this was the case, still Job does not see himself as sinless. Indeed, his words are a frank confession, "I have sinned" (7:20a). Still, even though he was a sinner like all humans, this should not have been an afront to God. The series of pointed questions, all beginning with "Why?" point to his continuing bewilderment. They imply that Job knows he is a sinner, and he equally knows that God forgives: but why has this not happened? These are not the words of a doubter, but in fact, it is Job's very faith that lies behind his bewilderment. Such questions arise in the dark night of the soul when God seems silent.