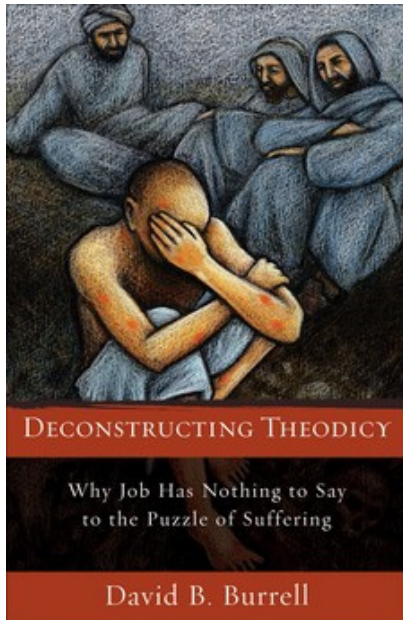


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Burrell, David

Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering

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I think all would admit that Job is a compelling book. It appeals to biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, psychologists, legal scholars, and many others in the learned and professional fields. Thousands of readings exist, and one, therefore, must be keenly aware of which lens a particular commentator is using when analyzing the book. Burrell is a Roman Catholic philosophical theologian, and it is through this lens that he reads the book of Job. He seeks in this small volume to examine Job's relationship to theodicy from a philosophical perspective. Burrell's primary area of competence is medieval philosophical theology, especially in comparative philosophical theology of the period. He can thus work with the great medieval thinkers from the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions and beyond. He brings all this, as well as modern theology, philosophy, and biblical and qur'anic readings of Job, to bear on his understanding of the book. Burrell is careful to point out that this volume is not an extended biblical exegesis; rather, it is a reflective essay on the book of Job to which Burrell brings a lifetime of learning and insight. The volume has the feel of a book that has been developing over a career of serious reflection; Burrell is integrating a large amount of material to make his point. That is the volume's beauty.

The work is fairly short, the main text being only 130 pages of relatively large print, with very few footnotes. The bibliography and index are also extremely condensed, each about 2.5 pages. The book's production is inviting and easy on the eyes. By all these features, one might expect a book for a more general audience and be lulled into a sense of intellectual complacency. But the reader should beware! The book is meant for an audience of philosophers and theologians and is quite rigorous in its analysis. The length of the book forces Burrell to abbreviate his discussions of the theologians and philosophers on whom he relies both primarily (Augustine, Saadiah Gaon, Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, Gersonides, T. Tilley, and M. McCord Adams) and secondarily (Avicenna, Ibn Sida, Averroes, and L. Wittgenstein). Additionally, he expects his reader to be quite familiar with some of the key secondary literature about these important figures. These attributes make approaching the book for the nonphilosopher or theologian significantly more difficult.

Burrell's main concern is stated on page 19:

[W]e hope to address two issues at once: The abiding puzzlement on the part of those wedded to theodicy, querying how any suffering from affliction could possibly profit from overhearing Job's ranting and raving; and on the other hand, to show those disillusioned with various attempts at theodicy how his rant and rave offers a performative alternative to any attempt to "explain" affliction. A purportedly "theological reflection" must show how "philosophy" can be put to therapeutic use by removing theological obfuscation.

His thesis is that the book of Job is fundamentally a philosophically deconstructing instrument. It deconstructs on two levels. First, the book of Job is a "trenchant critique of a unilateral application of the Deuteronomic formula for the covenant of God with Israel" (9). What he means here is that Job deconstructs all rigid applications of the principles of Deuteronomic retributive justice as are modeled by the three friends and Elihu. This unyielding legal view is not, to Burrell's mind, what God's covenant with the Israelite people connotes, as is disclosed by the book of Job. Second, the book is a critique of both classical and contemporary theodicies (10)— here Burrell is using theodicy in its strictest sense, which is the justification of the presence of evil in God's world (13, 116).

Burrell argues that all such theodicies are deconstructed by the fact that God declares in the epilogue that Job was right as against his friends. Burrell's thinking is that Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu, all Israelite, according to Burrell, offered Job, a non-Israelite, the same inflexible, hackneyed application of retributive justice, with differing emphases and arguments that imitate modern theodical strategies. Eliphaz is something of a dogmatist who attempts to refute most strongly Job's blamelessness. Bildad focuses,

instead, on the juridical aspects of the matter and defends God's justice. Zophar, on the other hand, is primarily a philosopher and emphasizes the question of whether knowledge of God is ultimately possible. Elihu is simply a young and haughty fool who is the most brazen in speaking for God but yet can only repeat what his elders have already said. Burrell believes that Job is in the right, against these views, because he alone spoke to God and asked for an audience with God, instead of arrogantly speaking for God, as did his friends: "God cannot be commending Job for 'getting it right,' as we might say. For his cumulative outbursts are a far cry from attempts to explain his plight, never pretending to be more than bewildered complaints—despite the ways his 'friends' often construed them. What the voice from the whirlwind commends is rather the inherent rightness of Job's mode of discourse: speaking *to* rather than *about* his creator" (109). Job's direct communication with God and the final sacrificial ritual of the epilogue comprise the "performative alternative" to all explanations of why one might be or should be suffering (19; see also 93, 108, 115). Burrell's solution to suffering in God's world is not that God enforces retributive justice. It is not that God tests us. Rather, the book of Job avows that God is with us, hears us, and responds to our suffered cries.

To Burrell, it is not important that Job is demanding of, and somewhat threatening to, God—moving from cursing, lament, and complaining to considering filing a lawsuit in 13:19 (113–15). It is also not terribly significant that God is somewhat blustering in his response to Job (115–16). What is most critical is that the "creator-God" indeed responds to Job at all. As God speaks the creation into being in Genesis, so God speaks Job into silence, peace, and, ultimately, blessings (133–38). This fact is both the mystery of God and the mystical of the creation (124 citing Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "not *how* the world is the mystical, but *that* it is [1961 6.44]").

Burrell makes clear both who his audience is and his primary point when he avers that the book of Job deconstructs facile theodicies by "accentuating (in poetic form) the animadversions directed by both Aquinas and Wittgenstein to thinkers so intent on 'the way the world is' that the mystery of its very existence can easily escape them" (124). He maintains, with McCord Adams, that we cannot continue to explain God, God's ways, or the problem of suffering in God's world. This exercise is both useless and demeaning—to those who suffer, to the beauty and gracefulness of the creation, and to God. Instead, we need to be in relationship with God and involved in the human community. We deal with the world's horrors, per Burrell, by "activating that 'non-reciprocal relation of dependence' that defines our very creaturehood, thereby transforming the fact of our existing into an undeserved gift. Metaphysically, this move makes of our very existence an 'existence-to' the Creator, as Aquinas cannily puts it" (125). Burrell's conclusion is that Job's "ranting and raving" is really quite worthless except to call God to help him, because Job is an utterly dependent creature of the Creator God. Burrell is asserting that, when

people become more aware and truly surrender to their total dependency on the Creator-God, they will have a new understanding of the world that will transcend, or at least help them cope with, the problem of suffering.

Burrell goes on to argue that life is foundationally dialogic, and all attempts to deal with suffering must also be dialogic, as is understood by Augustine and revealed in his *Confessions* (127–29). In his analysis of the *Confessions*, Burrell demonstrates that Augustine's friends and companions were the ones who cultivated his faith and supported him in his struggles, unlike Job's friends, who seemed entirely unsympathetic beyond chapter 2. Burrell stresses that we must all be like Augustine's fellows and manifest God to the suffering. One must not stand by and spout shallow theology or theodicy.

Burrell believes, further, that theologians who remain caught up in the quagmire of theodicy have, in essence, lost both their connection to and grounding in Scripture and their sense of the mysterious nature of God and the mystical and graceful essence of the creation. Such theologians participate in monologic statements that describe God and speak for God in their theodicies, much like Job's friends. Instead, they would be better served by entering into the dialogic with God through Scripture and human community.

The work's structure is set out in a short preface and eight chapters. Chapter 1 delineates Burrell's thesis, method, and primary resources for the argument. Chapters 2–4 contain his reading of the book of Job, which I will address more fully in a bit. Chapter 5 is an essay by A. H. John, an Islamist, who reads Job (Ayyub) in the context of the Qur'an and later Islamic literature. The import of Islam's understand of Job is manifold to Burrell. Job has the gift of patience and a call to suffering; Job is a model believer in that he has a manifest faith and calls to God in his suffering; and Job is both an intimate of and prophet of God (77), "the most merciful of the merciful" (71). Burrell will, significantly, return to Job as a prophet, in that Job stands against the three friends, who represent the "teachers of Israel" (132). Chapter 6 analyzes the medieval Joban readings of Saadia, Maimonides, Aquinas, and Gersonides, as well as the philosophies of the last three, to make the point that we should not fixate on God as transcendent, distant, and remote but rather focus upon God as creator and communicator. He summarizes that the normal expectations regarding transcendence are, in fact, reversed when one understand that God "is present to each temporally existing things as a source of its being" in each present moment (105). He takes from this fact, relying fundamentally on Aquinas, that this "alone reminds us that despite that profound 'distinction' of Creator from all that is (created), the possibility of dialogue is inscribed in the creating relationship" (105) Chapter 7 brings the modern work of Tilley and McCord Adams to bear on the problem of modern theodicies and suggests that the book of Job can mediate between these two contrasting views of the

problem of theodicy.¹ Tilley tends to read Job more traditionally, but Burrell likes and utilizes his particular focus on Job's performative speech acts, which are "forms of discourse other than the propositional" and which can lead us "to enlightenment" (123–24). Burrell is more sympathetic toward McCord Adams's view that we can no longer attempt explanation of theodicy but rather be directed "to ways of activating that 'non-reciprocal relation of dependence' that defines our very creaturehood, thereby transforming the *fact* of our existing into an undeserved gift," which is deeply rooted in Aquinas (125, emphasis added). Chapter 8 is the conclusion, where Burrell brings all these diverse themes together, using Aquinas and Augustine as his main supports, into the final idea that suffering can only be handled through divine-human and human-human communication.

Although Burrell is no friend of process theology,² he would, I think, agree with A. N. Whitehead's statement, "All simplifications of religious dogma are shipwrecked upon the rock of the problem of evil."³ It is very hard philosophically to understand some of the ways in which the monotheistic problem of theodicy has been solved. Burrell is entirely correct in asserting that so many of the proposed solutions make light of the real suffering that humans endure. Moreover, many such solutions seem to make God less than omnibeneficent. Countless readings of Job do, to my mind, the same things. I ask plainly: What kind of god causes or allows the death or destruction of Job's ten children, most of his servants, a great deal to all of his livestock, his son's house, his health, and his reputation on a bet, a wager, a dare, or even to test Job's faith when he already knows the condition of Job's faith? If that is God, I must say, No thank you! These traditional readings, while understandable, are entirely unhelpful to people who suffer terribly. We are left saying to the discomfited, "God never gives you more than you can handle," which is always more of a consolation to the speaker than the recipient of such clichéd theology. This, I think, is precisely what Burrell sees in the speeches given by Job's friends. The difficulty with the cliché is that it leaves a false impression, because someone or something does give some people much more than they can handle. People, in reality, spend years in a depressed state, go insane, commit suicide, wither away unto death, and definitely suffer to an overwhelming degree—especially when alone. The living, often, do not receive their Joban epilogue of restoration, their chapter 42. In making Job's suffering his fault and deserved fate, the friends do not have to exert themselves to assist him in any way—to be the divine body or agent of such restoration. Hence, Burrell's solution is more comforting

1. M. McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); and T. W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

2. D. B. Burrell, "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?" *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 125–35.

3. A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1960), 74, cited in David Ray Griffin, *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 202.

and supportive than the usual reading. He keeps us focused on the need to be in community with God and humanity in order to handle whatever drama and trauma we may see in our lifetimes. It is finally an “Immanuel theology,” God is with us (Isa 7:14). I appreciate in Burrell’s solution his obvious philosophical learnedness and finesse, commitment to the theological and philosophical uses of Scripture, deep care and concern for humanity, willingness to stand up for the disenfranchised and suffering, and impatience with cheap theodicies.

I do have, however, one philosophical and one theological question. First, all the while Burrell is steeped in medieval Aristotelian philosophers and their readings of Job, he is dabbling with Wittgenstein’s disillusionment with certain philosophers and a few of his non-Aristotelian concepts. Most important, he uses (the earlier) Wittgenstein to support his claim that God is mysterious and the world is a mystical and grace-filled place, which we often miss because of our arrogant endeavors and bold speech. I must confess that I am not enough of a philosopher to understand precisely how Aquinas and Wittgenstein can be reconciled in the way that Burrell maintains in chapter 8. Second, throughout the discussion, but especially during that of Wittgenstein, I wondered whether Burrell was not actually falling back upon the theodical solution that God is ultimately mystery and acts beyond our conception of morality. This allows Burrell to beg the question of whether God is omnipotent and its implications. His reading of Job seems to suggest as much; his use of Aquinas seems to advocate that as well. Yet he ignores the inferences of these things to say (putting this in its worst light), “Let’s not talk about this any longer; instead, let’s just trust the mysterious and mystical God and get down to the business of helping each other.” I am all for helping each other, and, with D. Bonhoeffer, agree that such discipleship can be very costly.⁴ I am not equally convinced that we should stop talking about theodicy lest it become the proverbial “hippo in the living room.” I would, however, agree with Burrell that we could all do without easy and belittling theodicies. In sum, I suggest that these issues and a great many more of his philosophical and theological moves needed much greater unpacking for one not as thoroughly versed in philosophy as is Burrell.

I, too, believe that the biblical scholar might be dissatisfied with the book for a number of reasons, all of which relate to how we approach our subspecialty. First, Burrell does not read Hebrew and is not familiar with very much Joban scholarship. He relies for his views fundamentally on one translation (that of J. Bizjak, bishop of Slovenia),⁵ which is not easily accessible, and three commentaries (those of G. Gutiérrez, J. Wilcox, and B.

4. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1966 [1937]).

5. J. Bizjak, *A Key to Job: Translation, Interpretation and Structure of the Book of Job* (Jerusalem: Tantor, 1991).

Zuckerman).⁶ His other Joban bibliography is small and written mostly two decades ago or more. For his understanding of the law in Job, he relies on J. Fingarette, an attorney, rather than on N. Habel, the far superior legal reader to this interpreter's mind, of whom Burrell is aware.⁷

Second, he tends not to read the whole book but reads it in disconnected parts. This is revealed in several ways. Most significantly, he finds three verses of the book (42:7–9) to be central and reads the rest of the approximately 1,100 verses in light of them. Moreover, he takes great stock during his argument in the friends all being Israelite and Job being a foreigner (e.g., 17–18, 25, 126, 132 [esp. 126]). The problem here is that most contemporary biblical interpreters do not agree with this position,⁸ including Gutiérrez (3). Elihu is the only friend with a clearly Israelite name. Furthermore, most scholars would not consider a Temanite, a Shuhite, and a Naamathite as originally Israelite. In addition, I think that Burrell's discussions regarding the significance of the characters' places of origins could be misread as to be counter to his general comparative theological agenda.⁹ The above two reading strategies allow Burrell to accept the most traditional view of the book's prologue, one that is highly inconsistent with his own understanding of the failure of theodicy. God bargains with the satan, which he calls the divinity's "alter-ego" (14) and a "trickster figure" (22) who sets up a situation in which Job cannot win. He labels the prologue a "framing conceit" and says that it is a "God-soaked" context (14). He continues, "God has no compuncture about testing his servants, especially those who show themselves faithful" (23). To avoid the clear inconsistency with his own views that this reading establishes, Burrell argues that, although the prologue seems to suggest that Job is no more than a classical theodicy wherein an individual is tested by God and receives reward or punishment, it is actually far different from that because of the book's dialogues. In such a strong reliance on the dialogues and epilogue, Burrell simply did not have to strive for a more careful, unified, and creative reading of the prologue, one that is more consistent with his theological position and which, I suggest, does exist.

6. G. Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (trans. M. J. O'Connell; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987); J. Wilcox, *The Bitterness of Job: A Philosophical Reading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); and B. Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

7. H. Fingarette, "The Meaning of Law in the Book of Job," *Hastings Law Journal* 29 (1978): 1581–1617; and N. Habel *Book of Job: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

8. See, e.g., C. Newsom, "The Book of Job," *NIB* 4:328, 357.

9. See, e.g., D. B. Burrell, "God, Religious Pluralism, and Dialogic Encounter," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (ed. R. Chopp and M. L. Taylor; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 49–78.

Third, his discussion of the dialogues is especially sparse. Burrell asserts that Job is not truly responding to his friends in their riposte; rather, he is always addressing the “God of Israel” to initiate a dialogue with the divine. I find the eighteen-page analysis of the dialogue to be too thin and sketchy to be thoroughly convincing on this point. Instead, I am generally left with the impression that Burrell relies on some nontraditional translations and overreads the text. It was also, I think, unfortunate that in the discussion of dialogism, Burrell did not mention either Mikhail Bakhtin on the concept of dialogism, generally,¹⁰ or C. Newsom’s latest work on this particular characteristic of the book of Job, in particular.¹¹ This is a salient flaw because Burrell asserts that God will ultimately vindicate Job in the epilogue due to Job’s consistent request for dialogue. The same difficulties of overreading and the existence of conceptual leaps exist in his discussion of the epilogue in chapter 4. In particular, the relationship of the final sacrifice to a “performative alternative” to theodicy was not tied back into the main argument.

Although I can lodge some criticisms with Burrell’s work from the standpoint of a biblical scholar and as one who reads Job quite differently, I respect his effort to use the book of Job to challenge theodicies that fail to appreciate the intensity of human suffering. Further, Burrell’s effort to combine biblical and philosophical-theological insights—both ancient and modern—is to be admired in this time of extreme scholarly subspecialization. I hope more work of this kind will appear—even though I am keenly aware that projects that cross such boundaries require a great deal of work. Burrell is right in asserting that Job deconstructs theodicies proposed across the millennia. The book of Job does maintain that we humans are called by God to participate in dealing concretely with the problem of suffering as it arises. For those who know my own work on Job, it is apparent that Burrell and I simply draw those conclusions through diverse readings of the book of Job.

Because this volume is highly sophisticated philosophically and theologically and much is abbreviated, I would recommend it primarily to philosophical-theologians, biblical theologians, and those interested in the book of Job and its history of interpretation.

10 See, e.g., M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (ed. M. Holquist; trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; University of Texas Press Slavic Series 1; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

11 C. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).