

March 6, 2006
UUFTC Sonora

Job's side of the Story

Thank you for inviting me here to speak with you today. There has been so much misunderstanding and disagreement about my story that I'm glad to have a chance to set the record straight. I was surprised that my story made it into the Bible, because it's a very subversive story, as I think you will see!

So, let me tell you my story! It happened many, many years ago, you know, but I remember it all as if it were yesterday! I was known as the greatest man in the land of Uz: I had many, many sheep, camels, and oxen, and lots of servants. I had 7 sons and 3 daughters, and I celebrated all the Hebrew feast days with them and their children. But more importantly, I was blameless and upright in every way. I was a completely righteous man! I feared God and turned away from evil, and my story confirms that.

Now, the people of that time believed in Jahweh, a God who rewarded virtue and punished wrongdoing, a distant God who sat in constant judgment over humans. If a person was wealthy and had high status, we believed that person was "righteous" and thus favored by God; if someone was poor, or sickly, or otherwise ill-favored, we believed that they were being punished for their wickedness and lack of piety. This theology was very prevalent in my day, and as I think you can see, it's still very prevalent in the modern world. It's a kind of social Darwinism, justifying greed, and blaming those who are suffering for their condition.

But back to my story. One day, all of a sudden, servants started running to me, telling me of disasters: my oxen, my donkeys, and my camels were all stolen, and all the servants minding them were killed by marauding tribes and bandits. A fire descended from heaven and killed all my sheep and shepherds. And a great wind came across the desert and blew down the house of my eldest son while all my sons and daughters were gathered there, killing them all.

Everything I had, including my children, had been taken from me in a single day. Well, as you can imagine, I was devastated. I tore my robe and shaved my head in mourning, and I fell on the ground. Despite my sorrow and anger, though, I didn't curse God. I said: "naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

As if all that wasn't bad enough, not long after all that, I was suddenly afflicted with sores and boils from my feet to my head. I was left sitting naked, among the ashes of my world, and scraping my ailing skin with a broken piece of pottery. My wife was still with me, and she said, "do you still persist in your integrity; curse God and die!" But I refused to curse God; instead I said: "shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?"

And then three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar came to visit me. Some friends! Their visit was certainly no comfort. In one way or another, each of them told me, over and over again, that I couldn't possibly be blameless; that God would not be punishing me unless I had sinned in some way. Well, I argued with them, I can tell you. People talk about "the patience of Job," but I was anything but patient. I cursed the day that I was born. And over and over again, I demanded my day in court; I wanted a

chance to confront God, and to show him that I was innocent and that I had been wronged. I wanted someone to be on my side. The Hebrew word for this is *go'el*, which means a family member, such as an eldest son or cousin, who looks out for the interests of others in the family. I wanted someone to be my advocate! I wanted someone with the power and the presence to take up my case, someone to be on my side. I knew if I had a champion, I could win my case with God! But I also knew, deep down, that I wasn't going to get this hearing that I sought, and that planted in me the first seed of doubt about my belief that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

Finally, my so-called friends and I exhausted ourselves arguing, but we didn't find any answers, and they certainly gave me no comfort. They proclaimed God's justice, goodness, and majesty, but they never could explain why I had been made to suffer despite my righteousness. I was in a profound state of despair, despite the comforting of my wife, who remained with me throughout all this.

And now, my friends, comes the part of the story that has caused so much confusion, and that scholars and priests have debated ever since. Was it a dream, a vision? Some sort of trance or seizure? To this day, I can't tell you. All I know is that it was as real to me as anything I have ever experienced. There was a mighty roaring sound, a huge storm suddenly appeared, and out of it a whirlwind. And from the whirlwind came an overpowering, majestic voice. A voice that I took to be the voice of God. And for the first time, I understood why we Hebrews often spoke of Yahweh as "the unnamable," or "the unknowable," why we never speak the name aloud, and why we forbid graven images of God. Because I could see that whatever it was that confronted me in my vision was so vast, and so different from anything within my experience, that our depiction of God as a distant and divine judge was way off the mark and so inadequate.

The voice began to proclaim in some of the most beautiful poetry ever spoken or written. "Where were you," the voice demanded, "when I laid the foundation of the earth." And the voice went on to describe the wonders of the natural world, of creation itself. The oceans, the rising sun each morning, the light and the darkness, the storehouses of snow and hail and rain, the stars and the clouds.

And I was awestruck by the beauty of this description of the natural wonders of the world. And then, this voice, this unknowable God, went on to describe members of the animal kingdom – the lion and her cubs, the mountain goat and antelope as they give birth, the wild ass as it runs free, the ox, the ostrich, the horse. And the voice spoke to me of the raptors – eagles, hawks, and vultures – and it ended with the image of baby vultures, eating food provided by their parents and sucking up the blood of dead animals. I wanted divine justice, and the voice spoke to me about tiny vultures drinking blood! As the voice spoke of these wonders it was clear that this unknowable God takes immense pride in each of these manifestations of creation and loves them, along with us humans. And I was humbled. When the Voice commanded me to respond, I put my hand over my mouth and declined to speak.

I had wanted a nice, neat world in which God sits on a distant throne and hands out justice; a world of order in which outcomes are predictable, in which the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. But the voice was telling me about a much more ambiguous world, a world of unpredictability, of chaos; a world in which suffering may

have no explanation or vindication. I began to see the vulnerability of human existence, and to see suffering as a product not of divine retribution, but of an unpredictable world.

Finally, I knew how to answer the challenge posed by the voice of the unnamable from the whirlwind. Before, I had heard of God through scripture and the words of the priests, but now I had seen the “unknowable” through the beauty and the wildness of all of creation. And I knew that the world is much vaster than our human conceptions of a simple system of divine control and justice. We humans are set loose in a chaotic, sometimes terrifying, world, and it is up to us to make meaning out of the turmoil.

Then, I said my final words to the voice from the whirlwind, words that scholars, and rabbis, and ministers, have argued over ever since. In most versions of the Bible, the translators have me saying something like: “therefore [having seen you], I despise myself, and I repent in dust and ashes.”

Well, this interpretation may suit the needs of Judeo-Christian tradition, but it’s not what I said, and it’s not what I meant. The Hebrew word translated as “despise” is *ma’as*, which can mean either “to despise” or “to reject.” Scholars are puzzled because there is no apparent object for this verb in the text, so they supply one, such as “I despise myself,” or “I reject my words.” And then there’s the phrase *niham ti’al*, which the traditional translators have rendered as “I repent in dust and ashes.” Nowhere else in the Bible is this phrase used to connote repentance. What the phrase means, and what I meant, is “I comfort myself,” or “I am comforted about.”

After all, what reason did I have to despise myself or to repent? Throughout the story, it is clear that I was blameless and upright, that I was righteous – so what reason was there for me to hate myself or to feel repentant? If anyone should have been repentant, it was God, who caused me all this suffering. And why? Just to win a bet! The traditional interpretation also overlooks everything that I had learned from the beautiful and majestic voice of the unknowable, coming from the whirlwind. I now knew that the human condition is unpredictable, and that there is no such thing as divine justice. In other words, I understood that what I had always believed is a false theology. So what I was rejecting was the comforting, but ultimately useless, belief that God is just and rewards the righteous. I had come to an acceptance of the human condition, which is one of frailty and vulnerability in the face of a chaotic and unpredictable world. I used the phrase “dust and ashes” to refer to the human condition – as in, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” So, what I really meant, based on the Hebrew words I actually used, was: “I reject [You] -- the God of retribution theology -- and I comfort myself that I am human.”

For the first time, I was truly free! Free of a theology that weighs humans down with the notion that their condition in this life is attributable to their good deeds and piety -- or to their godlessness and wickedness. I now knew for certain that a system based on divine justice was not a realistic view of the world, and I could accept being human, with all its risks along with its joys. And the fact that a “happy” ending was tacked on to my story at some point really doesn’t change any of that. I was profoundly changed by my suffering and my vision of the voice from the whirlwind, whatever success or failure I might have had in the world from then on.

So, how did all this affect my theology? Having rejected the God that I had always known, I could have become an atheist. This would have been a logical and understandable reaction to my realization that I had been worshipping a false God. I

might have concluded that the universe lacks meaning of any kind and become a nihilist. That could have been the end of my story! But I didn't do either of those things.

I've had a lot of time to reflect on all of this, you know -- some 2,500 years -- and as I did so, I came to realize that my story contains many clues pointing me in new theological directions. First of all, remember my loyal wife, who wasn't given a name when the story was first written. Archibald MacLeish gave her the name "Sarah," in his play *J.B.* Sarah doesn't die in our story, she is still with me at its end, and she and I had another 7 sons and 3 daughters together. Sarah stayed with me through all our suffering, and what held us together was love. She knew long before I did that my wish for divine justice was misplaced, but she stayed with me anyway. And in our shared love, we experienced the presence of an unknowable, unnamable Divine Spirit in the Universe, that is very different from the God of traditional theology.

And what about the natural world that was described so beautifully by the voice I heard from the whirlwind? I have to believe that the author included that poetry in my story for a reason. The Mountains, the thunderstorms, the trees and rocks and ocean waves, and the creatures, from the tiniest microbes to the mighty whales! Is it possible that there really is an unknowable, unnamable Divine Spirit that is present in all the works of creation, that participates along with us in the daily work of that creation, and indeed that is present in each of us?

And if that is so, maybe my wish for someone to be on my side is not so far off the mark after all. I had learned that there is not an all-powerful, all-knowing God, who administers justice in the world. But suppose, just suppose, there is a Divine Spirit in the world that participates with us in the ongoing work of creation. That there is a Sacred Presence with us that glories when the world is whole and that suffers when the world, and its creatures, are broken.

Well, I'm not going to claim that my story answers all these questions. Of course, given the nature of the problem, it's impossible for any of us to have all the answers. No, but my story gives us lots of clues about how we might attempt to connect with the unknowable, unnamable Holy Presence in this cosmos of ours. I've spent many centuries pursuing these clues, and ruminating on the existence of the divine in the world, and I have learned a thing or two. I have learned that we connect with this Divine Spirit when we find sacredness in the natural world. I have learned that we connect with divinity in the world when we come together in our suffering, with compassion for each other. And I have learned that we connect with Holiness in the universe when we experience love. And, you know what? -- I have learned that that is enough.

My prayer and blessing is that each of you may find ways to connect through this love -- to connect with each other and with the unknowable, divine presence in the world! My prayer and blessing is that you continue to build this beloved community, to grow together through compassion and caring, and to proclaim your values to the wider world, which needs them so badly!

Blessed be! And Amen!