

Human Experience, Biblical Interpretation and Theological Discernment

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Wisdom literature of the Old Testament gives us a glimpse into some aspects of the nature of the Bible. Wisdom literatures shows how to engage theologically in a process of discernment when traditional teachings seem to conflict with new experiences. The teaching and the wisdom of the sages is esteemed and honored as a source of knowing God and the world. Yet because of the nature of the wisdom genre, traditional teachings are not considered final. Traditional teachings, according to the sages, must always be open for reflection and reformulation based on new human experience.

What we can learn from the biblical wisdom tradition is that faithful discernment cannot be based on authoritarian, simplistic proof-texting or universalizing traditional teachings. The wisdom books in the Hebrew canon, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, open a window onto how the sages of ancient Israel thought about how knowledge and experience are dependent on one another. Faithful discernment must take seriously the contribution of human experience to theological reflection. It should be conducted in an environment that embraces dialogue, trust, and friendship. Human experience is not antagonistic to revelation. Nor should it be seen as a threat to the authority of the traditional wisdom teachings, which have become a part of the biblical tradition(s). Rather, human experience, according to the biblical witness itself, is an essential source for understanding who we are and who God is.

The ancient sages believed that the world, created by divine wisdom, has an inherent order that is knowable through observation and experience. One of the central viewpoints in the book of Proverbs is articulated through the maxim of cause and effect: the wise and righteous prosper, while the fool and the wicked get punished. Relying on the traditional teachings of the sages, which is based on observation and experience, the teacher in Proverbs 26:27 states: "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling." Although the book of Proverbs emphasizes the complexity of the world and that mystery remains, for the most part it is optimistic about our human capacity to know and gain wisdom through education, observation, experience and above all the fear of the Lord. It is notable that the books of Ecclesiastes and Job challenge—to say the least—the cause-and-effect maxim that is advocated in the book of Proverbs. If knowledge and theological reflection is dependent on experience, then new experiences are not trivial but are central for the ongoing reflection on God and the world.

The narrator of the book of Job and the character of God assert Job's integrity and uprightness: "That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1, 8). Yet Job was afflicted by an unjustified and horrific suffering. His experience brings the maxim of cause-and-effect seriously into question. His experience vividly shows that not all people who suffer do so because they are wicked.

As readers of the book we know more than the characters of the book. When Job's friends engage with Job's suffering in an attempt to comfort him, they operate from the theology they know, namely, retributive theology. The friends rely on observation, experience, special revelation, tradition, and their theological heritage. But Job insists that his experience and his perception as an innocent sufferer are essential for theological reflection. Because the friends were not willing to let Job's experience open the horizons

of theological inquiry into new realms, their intended comfort only deepens Job's wounds.

Interestingly, at the end of the book, God rebukes the friends for not speaking the truth about God as Job had done. The friends failed to let Job's own story as he wishes to tell it, stand out. Instead, they were busy trying to fit Job into *their* experiences and traditions. Because Job did not fit what they knew, they assumed he was a sinner. On the surface the friends engaged Job in a dialogue, but in reality they were talking past him.

The friends approached Job's experience through the traditional teachings of wisdom: since God had created the world by wisdom then there is a moral order in the world in which the wicked one is punished and the righteous one prospers. Therefore, if Job is suffering, then he has sinned. In order to support their claims about Job, the friends appealed to varied authoritative mediums of revelation. Eliphaz claims that he received a special revelation by means of a vision (Job 4:12-21). As a result he questions the possibility of human innocence before God (the reader knows well that Job is innocent, though). Bildad asserts that Job's children were killed because of their sin and transgression (8: 4). He appeals to the tradition accumulated over the generations as the authoritative word. He advocates for a retributive theology (Job 8:11-22). Although Zophar affirms that God's wisdom is higher than human wisdom, he wishes that God would speak to Job and show him the secrets of wisdom. But Zophar doesn't follow his own point. Instead of remaining silent, he speaks for God, inviting Job to repent from his sins so that God may restore his well-being (Job 11). And the fourth friend, Elihu, who declares that understanding is a divine gift given to humans through the breath and the spirit of the almighty (Job 32:8; 33:3-5), also assumes that Job is guilty (33:12).

Job responds to his friends affirming his innocence and establishes the case that he is righteous; he has a rightful case against God. Job's ways of understanding differs from that of the friends. He does not appeal to a vision, special revelation, accumulated tradition, or inspiration. Although, like his friends, he assumes a particular understanding of who God is and what justice should look like, *unlike his friends, he also relies on his own sense, experience, and taste*. He lifts up his voice against the claims of his friends as he says: "Is there any wrong on my tongue? Cannot my taste discern calamity?" (6:30). As the tongue can taste what is sweet and what is bitter, similarly Job can discern that he is suffering even though he is innocent (cf. 6:5-7). Job asserts that he is telling the truth.

On this point Leong Seow writes, "One also discerns a persistent hermeneutical tension between objectivity and subjectivity, between the role of a community of faith in the discernment of truth and the necessity of considering individual experience. Job rightly challenges the disregard of the subjective and personal element in theology, a point he makes powerfully through the metaphor of taste. Yet as in any theological position that is staked out, Job's view becomes problematic when it is absolutized, for in the end, the subjective and personal element becomes the normative rule."¹

While some of Job's friends tend to universalize their perspective to explain all cases of human suffering (Job 4:17; 5:7), Job uses personal language to speak of his suffering: "my vexation", "my calamity" (Job 6:2). Furthermore, Job urges his friends to look at him "face to face" (6:28), to treat him as a human being. If they would look at him face to face, "his face would make a moral claim on them that would change both their words and their attitudes."² In the preceding section of this verse, Job describes his friends as unreliable. They are like the wadis and the torrents of the wilderness. If

caravans relied on them, they would likely perish on their journey.

Finally, Job touches on an important insight into what occurs when a controversial issue surfaces. Job claims that when the friends encountered his calamity they were afraid (6:21). It is possible that the friends were affirming the traditional teachings of wisdom and their traditional interpretive assumptions as a way of asserting the order of the world as *they* knew it. Job's innocence, Job's story, Job's narrative seemed to threaten the moral norms as they had received them.

New experiences and the new knowledge they produce impact our theological assumptions. New experience and knowledge destabilizes the norms and the boundaries of what we deem acceptable. This is scary. Our fear, however, can be overcome by faithful discernment. Discernment which takes human experience seriously for theological reflection happens in an environment in which people honor dialogue, trust, and friendship.

Using the Bible in order to advocate for the inclusion of the resources of human experience and human knowledge for theological reflection might seem ironic. This irony underlines the fact that the Bible is authoritative even when it draws on human knowledge for the sake of faithful discernment.

It is also important to point out that there are limits to human knowledge, human wisdom. We learn this from the book of Job itself. Job 28 and the divine speeches in Job 38-42 underline the fact that full wisdom lies with God. But since we do not know our limits as human beings, we are invited to act like miners who try to find the precious jewels of wisdom even beyond the reach of ordinary human knowing. It is true that sometimes humans employ their wisdom for harm and not for good. Similarly there are ways in which some biblical texts and theological traditions have been used to oppress rather than to give life to people. That is precisely why we discern together as a community of faith so that we can keep each other accountable. We need to pray for wisdom as we interpret the biblical text and theological traditions, which were written and formed in historical settings and circumstances that are different from ours. We need to pray for wisdom as we interpret these texts in light of new human experiences and knowledge.

Faithful discernment that is open to new human experience and the knowledge it produces plays a role in theological reflection and requires transparency. We tend to ignore or deny that our own experiences play a role in our theological thought or interpretation of a text. The truth of the matter is that we do not think theologically or interpret the Bible or engage with tradition in a vacuum. We are biased, selective and inconsistent readers of the Bible. Human experience—whether we are aware of it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not—is an integral part of our interpretative decisions as we read the Bible. Our life experiences, education, social location and cultural assumptions influence our theological assertions and our interpretive methodologies.

We are like Job's friends! They approached Job according to their own worldview! We need to examine our worldview! We need to be critical of what we have assumed to be the norm in light of the new experiences that we or others go through.

Faithful discernment that is open to new human experience, the knowledge it produces, and the theological reflection it yields requires fostering friendship and trust. We may be afraid that engaging new experiences means that anything goes and that the world as we know it will shatter. Out of that fear, we may maintain our theological world

view at the expense of others who are suffering, marginalized, and excluded from the community of faith. If we hope to be better friends than Job's friends were to him, wise discernment will require us to look those who are marginalized in the face, to hear their stories and allow their experiences to transform our understanding of faith. Genuine friendship may require us to give up our own security and safety to be truly present to those who suffer.

¹ Seow, C. L. Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2013. 467-468.

² Balentine, Samuel E. Job. Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 2006. 129.

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