

## Job's Unfinalizable Voice: An Addendum to David Burrell's Deconstructing Theodicy

Trevor B Williams 

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### Abstract

Modern theodicies often offer definitive explanations for the unsolvable problem of human suffering. This philosophical enterprise was challenged by David B. Burrell's book, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering* (2008). His observations about the book of Job and the way it militates against theodical speculation are compelling, but there is a missed opportunity with his exegesis of Job 42:6. The Hebrew of Job's last words can be translated in at least five distinct (and legitimate) ways. Using this grammatical characteristic, this paper argues that the ambiguity in 42:6 creates an "unfinalizable" quality that allows sufferers to be unsilenced and participate in the meaning-making process. Situating the addendum with philosophical ruminations on theodicy, the argument turns to an exegetical section that comments on Burrell's discussion in "Denouement and Epilogue" and analyzes the Hebrew grammar of Job 42:1-6. This addendum compliments Burrell's deconstruction of theodicy, adding a further pool of resources for sufferers to remain unsilenced and narrate their own questioning of God.

### Keywords

theodicy, book of Job, Burrell, unfinalizable, Hebrew poetry

### Introduction

The theodical promise of the book of Job often gives an initial sense of hope followed by an inevitably vexing set of questions. For a biblical text with such a contentious history, many readers look to it for definitive answers amid suffering and pain. One of the most interesting responses to this quest has come from David B. Burrell, a priest of the Congregation of the Holy Cross and professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame. Burrell argues against the notion that theodicy provides definitive answers in his book, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering*

(2008).<sup>1</sup> While several parts of this book are worthy of consideration, Burrell's discourse about the Joban dialogue draws my attention. His argument claims that the book of Job is "expressly intended to deconstruct those very theories that many have felt it necessary to concoct in response to the plight of Job."<sup>2</sup> Theodical speculation has a particular history in Western thought, which makes Burrell's observations a timely source for theological reflections on the book of Job. The deconstruction of definitive answers brings the whole field of theodicy under a critical eye, but this paper engages with Burrell's argument and highlights a missed opportunity with Job 42:6.<sup>3</sup>

Engaging with Burrell's deconstruction of theodicy through a constructive addendum, we will build upon the biblical content in the chapter "Denouement and Epilogue," and explain how it complements his philosophical perspective. The book of Job deconstructs modern theodicies because the Joban dialogue does not rest on traditional answers. For, at the culmination of the theophany (38:1-41:34), Job utters his final words of the poetic dialogues (42:1-6). The Hebrew poetry behind this crucial moment in Job's story is incredibly ambiguous, and it has frequently been observed that its grammar is capable of supporting at least five distinct translations.<sup>4</sup> Burrell engages with this crucial moment extremely briefly, concluding that its ambiguity suggests that Job is silenced by God no matter what he says.<sup>5</sup> However, it is the indeterminate nature of Job's last words that articulates the unfinalizable offering to sufferers. Burrell's *Deconstruction of Theodicy* could be enhanced by providing a text where theological reflection on suffering can take place without falling prey to the temptation of silencing those who suffer. To facilitate this addendum, I will discuss some of the mistakes in modern theodicies and comment on Burrell's

<sup>1</sup> David B. Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008). This book is already several years old, but it remains one of the most interesting theological reflections on Job.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> This paper will follow SBL Academic Style for Hebrew transliteration.

<sup>4</sup> Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 12 vols (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 4:318-637. There are other studies that find anywhere between three or eight different translations of 42:6. These studies have been consulted in the writing of this paper, but Newsom's summary of five was chosen because she grounds it in the well-argued studies of other scholars. For the view that there are three readings, see: William Morrow "Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105.2 (1986), pp. 211-225. For the view that there are as many as eight readings, see: Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), pp. 197-198.

<sup>5</sup> Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, p. 49.

philosophical priorities. After the philosophical discussion, we will look to the exegetical possibilities offered by 42:6.<sup>6</sup>

### Troubles and Pitfalls of Theodicy

Studies in “theodicy” often attempt to formulate an answer to the puzzle of why there can be suffering in a world with a good, all-powerful God. This term was introduced by G.W. Leibniz as part of a debate with Pierre Bayle.<sup>7</sup> Theodicy, however, did not enter the Western philosophical discourse solely because of Leibniz. The book of Job has always been a central part of the discussion when biblical material is consulted, but our inheritance from Greek philosophy has been just as formative (e.g. Epicurus). Enlightenment thinkers like David Hume drew on this history in their arguments about the problem of evil. In particular, Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) sought to undermine some of the foundational defenses of classical theism.<sup>8</sup> Hume and other thinkers influenced the major tendencies in Enlightenment philosophy, which possess, in many contemporary discussions, qualities that have been fervently rejected or passionately defended. Theories of theodicy fall under Burrell’s suspicion because of their attempts at “disambiguating the scriptures” through “modernist reductions”; however, by looking at the book of Job’s deconstruction of these theories, theological reflection “will be pressed to an enhanced philosophical awareness as it becomes alert to the ways ‘theology’ can also compromise the faith-context it seeks to articulate.”<sup>9</sup> This process of clarification is paradoxical because it entails a process in which readers learn to deconstruct modern answers.

Burrell’s approach to this discussion comes from a particular critique of the Enlightenment and the value of Christian speech. Consequently, setting up a philosophical launching point will clarify this addendum’s interpretation of Burrell. The presuppositions that guide modernist theodicies are largely incongruent with Christian theology or its narrative formulations, but they are also representative

<sup>6</sup> There are numerous ways that scholars have tried to resolve the problems of 42:6 through diachronic methods. This paper approaches the text in a synchronic way because Newsom suggests that one of the goals of reading texts in different ways is in discovering why a text continues to be useful in similar and contradictory ways within communities. Carol A. Newsom, “Narrative Ethics, Character, and the Prose Tale of Job,” in William P. Brown, ed., *Character & Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson Pike, “Hume on Evil,” in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, ed., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 38-52.

<sup>9</sup> Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, pp. 14-15.

of abuses that result from an excessive dependence on Enlightenment terms. My entrance into this discussion is informed by Kenneth Surin and D.Z. Phillips, so I will use these thinkers to set the stage for a nuanced approach to theodicy. Each of the observations offered by Surin and Phillips will be applied to the philosophers that Burrell values in *Deconstructing Theodicy*. Modern theodicies have a number of difficulties that act in subliminal forms.

Kenneth Surin recalls that the classical definition of theodicy is: “a philosophical and/or theological exercise involving a justification of the righteousness of God.”<sup>10</sup> For Surin, the typical expressions of this definition are deeply problematic. Since the subject is often treated as though it were merely theoretical, many of the historically embedded occurrences of evil are disregarded. Surin takes this general disregard to be a force that “militates against a properly Christian response.”<sup>11</sup> The constraints that limit the logic of a Christian approach feed upon the philosophical conclusions of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century. This has already been alluded to with the work of Hume and Leibniz, but Surin refers to the entirety of that period’s philosophical theism. In fact, Surin points out that its brand of theism is simply a hypothesis that can be modified when problems pressure it towards reconfiguration.<sup>12</sup> Surin believes that these tendencies are embodied by the contemporary theodicies of Alvin Plantinga (freedom), John Hick (eschatology), and Richard Swinburne (providence).

The belief that God exists is often a mere philosophical proposition for some of these thinkers. Plantinga engages in a long argument to address the potential for contradictions in theism raised by the traditional framing of the question. He engages in this argument based on the reasonable conclusion that “the theist’s not knowing why God permits evil does not by itself show that he is irrational in thinking that God does indeed have a reason.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, Plantinga’s approach to this logical exercise denies the contradiction that theodicy tries to resolve, proposing that God could not have created a world without moral evil due to the necessity of freedom.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Hick argues that our world is the best possible world for the divine to engage in soul-making, but he also points to the fact that not every person is fully enlivened by God’s process of human actualization. For this reason, Hick heavily depends

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Signposts in Theology (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44. Plantinga’s argument is much more complicated than this, but this summarization of his conclusion suffices for our purposes here.

on eschatology to resolve this tension of wasted suffering, since we “must look towards the future, expecting a triumphant resolution in the eventual perfect fulfillment of God’s good purpose.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Swinburne justifies evil in the world by arguing that God could permit evil to further some other good in creation.<sup>16</sup> Swinburne’s argument is one of the most common, but he focuses on its particular providential aspect. Suffering can be justified according to God’s arrangements for each creature “so long as the package of life is overall a good one for each of us.”<sup>17</sup> The theodicies of Plantinga, Hick, and Swinburne rehearse common arguments in compelling ways, but Surin questions their general disregard of “logical syntax.”<sup>18</sup> Surin contends that advocates of modern theism fail to see that there is no “order” or “ratio” between the finite and infinite, which throws their theological utterances into “irreparable disarray.”<sup>19</sup> The explanations may function as compelling answers *in part*, but they are difficult to apply *in total*.

The distinctions that invite suspicion are often those that split “theoretical” and “practical” approaches to theodicy.<sup>20</sup> The fact that this kind of terminology even makes sense is a testimony to the irreparable disarray of theodical thinking. In his analysis of theodicy, D.Z. Phillips speaks directly about a similar dichotomy that splits the “logical” problem of evil from the “existential” problem of evil.<sup>21</sup> Making a distinction between these two “problems” is something Phillips sees amongst analytic philosophers of religion.<sup>22</sup> These philosophers define the existential problem with elements that deal with coping or making sense out of one’s life amidst suffering. In considering this trend, Phillips refuses to make any distinction between the

<sup>15</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Rev.ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 336, 340.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. x.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>18</sup> Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> The distinction between “theoretical” and “practical” theodicies is made in Kenneth Surin’s book as a way to describe the approaches of theologians and philosophers. Surin evaluates the positive and negative qualities throughout and lands on his own conception of how the more practical approaches are actually more serious, Christian ways of handling suffering and evil (*ibid.*, pp. 70-141). These terms are present in other theodicies and will be reflected in alternative language as well.

<sup>21</sup> As a matter of clarification, the word “existential” is used here to refer to the more personal aspects of suffering and how it impacts human existence. It is the lived and embodied responses and answers to which this word refers. This is opposed to the “logical” problem which has more to do with explaining how different beliefs can be reconciled together.

<sup>22</sup> D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. xi.

two problems because of their practical indivisibility. The logical is *rooted* in the existential, so “it is only by paying insufficient attention to existential problems of evil that an independent logical problem of evil can be thought to exist.”<sup>23</sup> This is probably the biggest problem with Plantinga’s theodicy, since disregarding the human element—that we are talking about people—is a conceptual mistake. We must imbue our logical formulations with a humility of presumption.

The problems with theodicy do not find their origin solely in the synthetic divide between “logical” and “existential” problems. In Burrell’s chapter “Two Opposing Views of Theodicy,” he relies on Terrence W. Tilley’s *Evils of Theodicy* (1991) and Marilyn McCord Adams’ *Horrendous Evils* (1999).<sup>24</sup> Both scholars compliment the philosophical comments made in this paper, but their significance lies in the link with Burrell’s approach. Tilley wrote at length about the ways in which the very goal of theodicy often causes its own kind of evil, using speech act theory to illuminate the power of texts.<sup>25</sup> These observations are relevant to the book of Job because its story possesses a distinct power as a religious and cultural classic that demands interpretation. Such a demand, Tilley suggests, is disregarded by theodicists when they ignore the text and silence Job’s voice as a sufferer.<sup>26</sup> Tilley highlights the fact that the book of Job is a text with many inconsistent speech acts that are self-defeating; consequently, it eludes all claims to *one* meaning or teaching. And, at crucial moments in its narrative, the book of Job is “so indeterminate that the ‘text’ of Job is, to a significant extent, made, not found.”<sup>27</sup> In this light, the text can serve as a warning against “religious sadomasochism,” and at the same time, refuse to offer finalistic, definitive answers, or “revelational data” about theodical questions.<sup>28</sup> These observations showcase why Burrell would be interested in Tilley’s project as they both point to the book of Job as a powerfully indeterminate and meaningful text. Several applicatory options are available and an emphasis on Job 42:6 looks increasingly plausible.

Tilley connects these conclusions to his overall critique of theodicy. The testimony offered by the continuing function of the book of Job counters inordinate appropriations of theodical language. Indeed, for

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>24</sup> Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000); and Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). For more connections on biblical reception, see Choon-Leong Seow, *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 231.

<sup>25</sup> Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, pp. 9-32. Tilley provides an account of speech act theory throughout the first chapter of his book.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

him, “construing the Book of Job as an assertive is to play God and to silence the voice of Job in the ongoing conversation about God and evil, the path taken by much of the Western theological and philosophical tradition.”<sup>29</sup> The book of Job is a testing ground for what theodicies get wrong, which is a project that Tilley pursues relentlessly in the latter parts of his book. Interestingly, in line with Surin’s observations, Tilley points to the philosophical history of theodicy as the place from which many of its problems have originated. Because theodicians deny “existential” concerns for “logical” ones, they often end up ignoring the needs of people who would inform them about the reality of evil and suffering. The desire to distance oneself from these details is, Tilley argues, based on the “Enlightenment obsession with reducing the muddy and mixed to the clear and distinct.”<sup>30</sup> Theodicians end up covering up and silencing sufferers by justifying the evils that befall them; moreover, “one of the evils of theodicy is that it effaces the difference between the world that theodicians wish to be (a world wherein God reigns) and the world that is.”<sup>31</sup> Overall, Tilley says that the practice of theodicy should never be forgotten and suggests that its energy should be spent changing the world.<sup>32</sup>

Marilyn McCord Adams presents her theodicy through a comparative lens that points to failures endemic in analytic philosophical strategies, and she suggests that our approaches to theodicy should emphasize resources for combatting evil.<sup>33</sup> One of Adams’ most consistent suppositions is that “Christian theism embraces a richer store of valuables than secular value-theories recognize.”<sup>34</sup> In addition, Adams critiques the “philosophical propensity for generic solutions” that seek a “single explanation” of humanity’s prevailing theodical problems, arguing that such explanations allow us to “ignore the worst evils in particular (what I shall call horrendous evils) and so to avoid confronting” their challenges.<sup>35</sup> For Adams, the term “horrendous evils” refers to situations in which participation “constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole.”<sup>36</sup> This approach is distinct in its focus on the individual’s participation in meaning-making and in the expectation that “God could be said to value human personhood in general, and to

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 109-110.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>33</sup> Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 26. Cf. Marilyn McCord Adams, “Theodicy without Blame,” *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988), pp. 215-45.



love individual human persons in particular, only if God were *good to* each and every human person God created.”<sup>37</sup> This is a high standard for theodicies to follow, but Adams’ conclusions show a pivotal pay off for her deconstruction of the typical frame of theodicy.

Burrell’s interest in Adams’ work was partially built on her “Resources to the Rescue” perspective and the possibilities provided for theodicy.<sup>38</sup> One of Adams’ principle claims is that “to show God to be logically compossible with horrendous evils, it is not necessary to produce a logically possible morally sufficient reason why God does not prevent them.”<sup>39</sup> Similar to Tilley’s approach, Adams contends that such universal explanations are “misguided” and often attribute “perverse motives to God.”<sup>40</sup> Militating against making “partial” explanations into “total” ones, Adams provides five scenarios to address the logical problem of horrendous evils that each offer different takes on the solution.<sup>41</sup> Important for my purposes, however, is Adams’ contention that to overcome the charge of parochialism, we must consider “a variety of contrasting positions” and “probe the resources of each for showing how an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God could defeat horrors within the context of the participants’ lives.”<sup>42</sup> This assembly of different perspectives offers insight to particular situations and circumstances. Adams highlights the potential fruitfulness of avoiding presumption in theodicy, saying that:

Just as multiplication of reasons God might have had for permitting a given evil undercuts the presumption that the evil in question is pointless, so—I suggest—showing how a variety of philosophical frameworks would afford God the means for defeating horrors erodes any presumption that no philosophically coherent theory including both God and horrendous evils can be found.<sup>43</sup>

In this perspective, the complexity of theodicy is retained and no “answer” is ultimately privileged in the existential or logical problems of evil.

These philosophical approaches to the problems of theodicy offer distinct insights on Burrell’s project in *Deconstructing Theodicy*. Burrell shows ways in which the book of Job rejects the theodical enterprise, but I argue that his exegetical reading could be considerably strengthened in ways that compliment his philosophical contentions. Purely philosophical approaches have often obscured the message

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-31.

<sup>38</sup> Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 155.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 159-77.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.



that the Joban dialogues try to convey. To counter such reductions, Burrell makes these dialogues a key feature in the deconstruction of traditional answers.<sup>44</sup> And, beyond the dialogues themselves, the focus of Job 42:6 offers a unique reflection on humanity's discourse with the Divine. In the theodicies of Terrence W. Tilley and Marilyn McCord Adams, two points have stood out: (1) we must avoid silencing the testimonies of sufferers, and (2) expanding theodicies beyond "total" explanations offer rich resources for sufferers. The book of Job's lack of definitive answers or revelational data is not a gap that theodicians need to fill. Instead, it is a profoundly wise move to stick to human terms that do not hide or cover up the realities of this world. Burrell's characterization of the book of Job as a deconstruction of theodicy is based on the breakdown of the Joban dialogues and his theological observations. However, the crucial final words of Job only receive a brief glance, even though they are arguably the culmination of deconstruction. By observing the offerings of 42:1-6, especially its ambiguity, the book of Job can be seen as a *warning* against the pitfalls of theodicy and a better way to approach suffering and evil in the world.

### Ambiguity and the Subversion of Silence in Job 42:6

Theodical speculations have experienced numerous problematics from age to age. Burrell's notion that the book of Job *deconstructs* their excessive claims to certainty creates a healthy lack of presumption. Still, in his "Denouement and Epilogue," Burrell comments on Job's demand for an answer and the power of the theophany that leaves me wanting more. Burrell posits that Job's encounter with God teaches him about his place in the cosmos, which is a lesson that is "hardly lost on Job."<sup>45</sup> Job's response to God constitutes the pious declaration that, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . Therefore I declare that I do not understand things too wonderful for me, which I do not know" (42:2, 3).<sup>46</sup> Burrell suggests that this encounter has "more emboldened than belittled him" and his eyes and ears are edified in this renewed dignity (42:4-5).<sup>47</sup> Through the potent shift in tone, readers wonder if the answers Job heard from his peers were ultimately misleading. And now, leading into the last words in 42:6, Burrell says:

<sup>44</sup> Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy*, pp. 27-44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

So like Abraham, who unmistakably recognized the One personally addressing him to be God, Job can retire from the fray humbly and with dignity: "Therefore I retreat and I repent in dust and ashes" (42:6).<sup>48</sup>

This interpretation highlights the fact that neither the theophany or Job himself can offer a single explanation for human suffering. Job is silenced in this exchange, but nevertheless, Burrell sought to preserve his dignity. However, the poetry of 42:6 provides the constructive opportunity for multiple readings, which would allow us to rhyme the exegesis with the theodicies of Tilley and Adams.

The analysis below will show how 42:1-6 fits in its context and how the ambiguity of 42:6 creates a theological balance with the theophany; it emphasizes God's otherness with Job's indeterminate response as the *unsilenced* sufferer. This exegetical reading will go into more depth than Burrell's analysis, but it seeks to complement his *Deconstructing Theodicy*. Through her Bakhtinian perspective and exegetical acumen, Carol A. Newsom observes that Job 42:6 can support a multiplicity of readings. She offers a list of five legitimate English translations: (1) "Therefore I despise myself and repent upon dust and ashes," (2) "Therefore I retract my words and repent of dust and ashes," (3) "Therefore I reject and forswear dust and ashes," (4) "Therefore I retract my words and have changed my mind concerning dust and ashes," and (5) "Therefore I retract my words, and I am comforted concerning dust and ashes."<sup>49</sup> Biblical scholars often do not know what to do with this ambiguity, but the depth of meaning that the different translations provide could be a helpful way to preserve Job's voice before the whirlwind. Moreover, William Morrow contends that the ambiguity of 42:6 is deliberately structured into the text. He argues that the choice of translation is "governed as much by larger thematic assumptions as by strict philological criteria."<sup>50</sup> This theological opportunity would include Burrell's conclusion and expand the potential resources for other readers.

Beyond the ambiguity of the Masoretic vocalization, there are other dynamics that some scholars pass over.<sup>51</sup> In his attempt to

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," pp. 4:318-637.

<sup>50</sup> Morrow, "Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6," p. 212.

<sup>51</sup> As a point of clarification, Hebrew utilizes an elaborate system of vowels and markings around the consonants that help the reader navigate the text and understand its correct pronunciation. The Hebrew language uses certain formulations of consonants with a variety of different meanings that are dependent on which vowels are present. An example of this is with the word *dābār*. If the vowels remain as they are it will typically be understood as a noun for "word" or "thing." However, if it is rendered with different vowels such as *dābar*, then it is the *Qal* verb "to speak." Alternatively, if it has other vowels such as *dāber*, then it is understood to be the noun "pestilence."

settle the ambiguity of 42:6, Daniel Timmer unintentionally points to a further cause of indeterminacy, since by pointing out that the addition of vowels was a late development in Hebrew, Timmer opens the door for a wider semantic range.<sup>52</sup> This observation regarding the text's degree of ambiguity raises the important question about other attempts to settle the text. Newsom, speaking about Job's last words, contends that, "asking which possibility is correct misses the interpretive significance of the ambiguity that is also part of the divine speeches."<sup>53</sup> Of course, the interpretive significance is largely tied to the fact that interpreters will be able to read the book of Job differently. Recognizing this, however, does not resolve everyone's desire for a text with absolute clarity. Michael V. Fox is skeptical about reading 42:6 without resolving its ambiguity, arguing that 42:6 cannot be read with multiple possible meanings. Fox has two main concerns: (1) in the first instance, a theological problem is created because Job would be speaking "ironically," which would spoil his moral character (i.e. deceiving God), and (2) this ambiguity creates a literary problem wherein the meaning of the book would be dependent on "a single, ambiguous verse, which must also be construed in a peculiar and idiosyncratic fashion."<sup>54</sup> These concerns are well placed and warrant consideration, but the crux of the matter is noting the way that meaning is constructed. Morrow's point about the "thematic assumptions" of the reader looms large here.<sup>55</sup> English-only readers are at a disadvantage because the nature of Hebrew poetry is obscured through the veil of translation.

And lastly, Fox seems to have disregarded his own observation about the book of Job's formation of two realities and how it could apply to 42:6. These two realities are: (1) formed *within* the narration where the characters (including God) play out their roles, and (2) formed *above* the narration where the author communicates to the implied reader, giving him or her privileged knowledge.<sup>56</sup> This observation highlights the fact that multiple narrative-realities are at work in the book of Job. And, if one plays with the hermeneutical possibilities amid these realities, the theological and exegetical problems could be resolved. *Within* the narration, the characters have a coherent discussion and understand one another's speech acts as the story comes to a close. The dialogue between God and Job makes sense

<sup>52</sup> Daniel Timmer, "God's Speeches, Job's Responses, and the Problem of Coherence in the Book of Job: Sapiential Pedagogy Revisited," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009), pp. 286-305.

<sup>53</sup> Newsom, "The Book of Job," pp. 4:318-637.

<sup>54</sup> Michael V. Fox, "Job the Pious," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 (2005), p. 365.

<sup>55</sup> Morrow, "Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6," p. 212.

<sup>56</sup> Fox, "Job the Pious," p. 351.

within the world of narration, being understood by the characters in their communication. However, *above* the narration, the reader stands in a privileged perspective in his or her assessments of the narrative. He or she formulates its coherence and possesses a *view from above* that comes to the story with an impression of this-worldly sufferers. In this light, it is unnecessary to regard Job's words as "ironic" for the ambiguity to be accepted as characteristic of the text.

Now, any reader who approaches ambiguity in 42:6 encounters the equally frustrating whirlwind theophany (38:1-41:34). The theophany helps set up the *deconstruction* of theodicy by removing definitive answers from the stage, but it also threatens to drown Job's voice. In an attempt to bridge this connection, Donald E. Gowan surveys the theories of what the theophany speeches mean, saying that interpreters like Robert Gordis and Matitahu Tsevat exhibit very different perspectives (i.e. divine justice is ordered into the world and that there is no such justice to be found anywhere).<sup>57</sup> There are numerous interpretations of the theophany that could be shared here, but Gowan appeals to a large group of scholars who claim that the speeches are not intended to communicate a "rational answer" to Job's questions. The theophany resolves illusions that Job's experience is not a reflection of reality; indeed, the speeches remind Job that there is no answer by avoiding the mistake of having God "champion" a view.<sup>58</sup> This decision is ultimately the wisest option because the world Job now inhabits is the same as his readers. An inordinate explanation would dehumanize him and, for us, remain a shallow prevarication.

Gowan calls Job's experience with the theophany a literary representation of the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This Latin phrase communicates the "wholly other" aspect of Job's encounter and brings to mind those of Habakkuk and the Israelites at Sinai.<sup>59</sup> In this exchange, Job discovers his proper place in the order of creation. Characterizing this observation as "putting Job in his place" is a little crude. Yes, the book of Job resists the answers that theodicy desires, but by reading what this book has to say (and does not), the revelation that Job is human *deconstructs* our pervasive notion that we can conceptualize and control the ineffable. Rhyming with Burrell's argument, Gowan posits that God takes Job seriously enough to speak to him.<sup>60</sup> Our desire to be inordinately more than human (on our own terms) necessitates the constant need for reminders. In its relation to the rest of the book, Newsom highlights the ambiguity of the theophany because just where the interpreter hopes to find

<sup>57</sup> Donald E. Gowan, "God's Answer to Job: How is it an Answer?" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 8.2 (1986), p. 87.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

the interpretive key, there is none to be found. Additionally, in Job's reply to the theophany (42:1-6), we learn that he has "understood something transformative in the divine speeches, yet he refuses to play the role of hermeneut for the audience, for he never makes clear exactly what he has understood."<sup>61</sup> The question for us now is to see what the creativity of Hebrew poetry could endorse and permit.

From the dramatic display in the theophany, the transition into Job's final words is very explicit. In 42:1, this shift functions to change the speaker directly from God to Job, using the direct object marker and the Divine name: *'et-yhwh*. Then, Job makes his declaration as a creature (42:2-5). And, finally, Job's final words represent the primary location of the text's ambiguity (42:6). The ambiguity, consequently, seems to be a structural element in the poetry. While 42:6 is this paper's interpretive priority, a brief comment about 42:2-5 will help elucidate Job's potential responses. Job's words in 42:2-5 repeat much of what is said during the theophany. Newsom, however, connects this with God's claim that Job has "darkened reason without understanding" (38:2; 42:3a) and acknowledgement that Job has spoken of things that he "did not understand" (42:3b). Additionally, Newsom points out that Job quotes God's command to listen and respond (38:3b; 40:7b; 42:4). These quotations make it appear that Job has definitively bent the knee to God, resulting in a rather "undialogical" portrait of the interaction between God and Job.<sup>62</sup> The content of 42:2-5 represents an acknowledgment of the theophany and the disclosure that Job's humanity has been decisively affirmed. God's speeches do not give an all-encompassing answer to the problem of suffering. Rather, the speeches emphasize, as Terence E. Fretheim has observed, Job's finitude by showing him that he is part of a wider world with creatures that make creation both ordered and disordered.<sup>63</sup> So, the big question here is, has God definitively silenced Job? This may have been the case if not for 42:6.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009), p. 235.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>63</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> The above quotations of the theophany are affirmed by Tremper Longman III, but he also observes language from the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:6) where Job realizes what the tower builders attempted to deny by acknowledging that God alone controls events. Additionally, Longman III draws a parallel with Psalm 73 and its concern with dealing with retribution, both Job and the poet realizing that having bitterness toward God made him a "brute beast" (Ps 73:22). Tremper Longman III, *Job*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), pp. 448-450. These insights offer an intense analysis of 42:2-5, but they are also a huge part of what interpreters solely focus on; indeed, Longman III comes to this conclusion himself by stating that understanding 42:6 as ambiguous ignores the context that shows that Job

The terse and final line of Job's utterance is: *'al-kēn 'em'as wēnihamtî* *'al-'āpār wā'ēper* (42:6). Newsom expounds on the importance of 42:6 as a gesture of the limits of dialogue and as a significantly "dialogical" opportunity. The ambiguity allows for the possibility of Job having other things to say; furthermore, it ought to be characterized as "unfinalizable" because other replies are always available for any particular interpreter.<sup>65</sup> The only translation that is not debated in 42:6 is the Hebrew construct *'al-kēn* ("therefore"). Every single word in the rest of the verse does not have that characteristic. The word *'em'as* can be understood in the different senses of reflexive or transitive. Thomas F. Dailey questions the intensity that it can carry as possibly involving the meanings of "repudiate," "recant," "retract," "reject," or "despise."<sup>66</sup> Obviously, this is a major piece of what allows the interpretive ambiguity. Likewise, the word *wēnihamtî* is relatively controversial because, as Dailey suggests, the meaning of *nāham* is determined by whether it is understood as a *Pi'el* or as *Nip'al* verb. Whatever direction an interpreter decides at this point is important because if it is a *Pi'el*, then it carries an emotive flair with the meanings of "to comfort" or "to feel pity." Alternatively, if the word is a *Nip'al*, it could be partitive with the possible meanings of "to change one's mind" or "to repent" (not unlike the word *šûb*).<sup>67</sup> In this case, with Morrow, it is reasonable to conclude that each part of the text can go in at least two different directions.<sup>68</sup>

The relationship that these words have with the phrase "dust and ashes" carries a significant amount of weight because it connects back to Hebrew anthropology. This phrase, as it appears in 42:6, is rendered: *'al-'āpār wā'ēper*. The utilizations of *'āpār wā'ēper* (Gen 18:27; Job 30:19; Sir 10:9; 40:3) are, as Pieter van der Lugt suggests, used to reference the "physical constitution of a human being."<sup>69</sup> Dailey analyzes the words in the above phrase, paying special attention to the word *'al*. Interestingly, it can be seen in a locative sense (in, on, upon) which would make it a specific place; additionally, it could be in a referential sense (about, concerning) which would point to a symbolic figure/ritual meaning of suffering or a statement about the difficulties of life.<sup>70</sup>

repents because of "his impatient insistence that God justify himself to Job" (ibid., p. 450). Of course, these are interpretive insights that Longman brings into the text, but they are interesting to say the least.

<sup>65</sup> Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas F. Dailey, "And Yet He Repents – On Job 42,6.," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 105 (1993), p. 205.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 205-206.

<sup>68</sup> Morrow, "Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6," p. 224.

<sup>69</sup> Pieter van der Lugt, "Who Changes His Mind about Dust and Ashes? The Rhetorical Structure of Job 42:2-6," *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014), pp. 623-639.

<sup>70</sup> Dailey, "And Yet He Repents – On Job 42,6.," p. 206.

In accordance with the ambiguity of 42:6, there are other attempts to resolve the problems in the text in a way that actually illustrates its poetic indeterminacy. One example is from Charles Muenchow when he criticizes Morrow's suggestion that the ambiguity in 42:6 is intentional because, for him, any "communicative event takes place within a context of broadly shared assumptions."<sup>71</sup> Of course, this shows that the only way Muenchow can get past the philological ambiguity is by consulting information outside the text and imposing it on 42:6.<sup>72</sup> Again, this highlights Morrow's observation about the fundamental role of the reader in the text's thematic interpretation.

And, in light of all these specific shades of meaning brought out by the ambiguity of 42:6, the possibilities for an "unfinalizable" ending to the book of Job remains an open option. There are numerous different ways that a reader can understand the relationship between the theophany (38:1-41:34), Job's affirmation of his finitude (42:2-5), and Job's indeterminacy (42:6). Still, this paper has suggested that the ambiguity in 42:6 creates a balance that avoids a *final* or *definitive* ending. Depending on the formation of the reader, this archetypal sufferer can choose to renounce his ways, offer a preliminary truce, or even demand another fate. Practically speaking, Job stands before a moment of *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* where a gap of knowledge is evident. The theophany does not give an account for why there is suffering in the world nor do the words of Job. However, 42:6 represents an affirmation that the dialogue is not over—it cannot be over. The unfinalizable conviction that Job provides for sufferers is itself a set of resources. These options are directly available for readers of Hebrew, but for the world of theological speculation, this message could make its way into the literature. We can be sure that Job does not babel or pedal nonsense.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Muenchow, "Dust and Dirt in Job 42:6.," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108.4 (1989), p. 598.

<sup>72</sup> In his own work, Muenchow places 42:6 within the cultural conceptions of honor and shame, which Muenchow believes constricts the possible meanings of the text. Of course, what Muenchow is admitting here is that philological considerations are not enough to restrict the meaning; therefore, Muenchow finds it necessary to search for a background that would do that for him. In this case, the background he uses to form his assumptions is from anthropological insights of the Mediterranean basin. For 42:1-6, Muenchow attaches to the phrase which Muenchow takes to mean as a cultural gesture where Job gives "a vivid demonstration of the essence of the shame response" (*ibid.*, p. 610). In this way, Muenchow advocates the idea that such a gesture of shame ultimately affirms God's acknowledgment of his lowliness as well as his worthiness (*ibid.*, p. 611). Muenchow ends up affirming that speculative insights from anthropology are the only way to settle the text, but this is exactly the beauty of the indeterminate nature of 42:6.



## Conclusion

None of the book of Job's speech acts disclose a final answer for the question of suffering. This is the fundamental wisdom that makes Job an archetypal figure for suffering. David B. Burrell's *Deconstructing Theodicy* builds on this essence and shows the pitfalls of presumptuous ruminations on suffering. Throughout this paper, I have sought to point out how Burrell's project would be enhanced if he included the sheer number of interpretive possibilities in Job 42:6. Burrell's project is a short and potent demonstration of the book of Job's insight for sufferers and those who wish to reflect on theodicy. My choice to call this paper an "addendum" is a compliment to Burrell, but I truly believe that the unfinalizable speech in 42:6 is Job's theodical voice. This opportunity is further illustrated by the work of Terrence W. Tilley and Marilyn McCord Adams, since their positions compliment the need to question definitive answers and inhuman formulations that do not speak to sufferers. Silencing a sufferer, namely Job, seems to exist in Burrell's conclusions (and Tilley's), even though he seeks to avoid this outcome. However, if the unfinalizability of 42:6 is emphasized, Burrell's arguments would be preserved along with a sophisticated expansion of literary resources.

The Old Testament has a profound tradition of being able to question God. This medium of communication exists from Abraham's dialogue with God to Habakkuk's cry for help.<sup>73</sup> The book of Job's exegetical coherence is a poetic construction that does not need editorial revision to make sense. Hermeneutically, 42:6 conforms to the reader's gaze. Readers in English do not get to experience this interpretive moment, but it exists nonetheless and could be a resource for those who need Job's help. This group is comprised of a venerable entourage of philosophers and sufferers, which is truly an ironic gift because the former certainly needs the latter. Burrell's insight provides the opportunity for further hermeneutical opportunities. As a deconstruction of theodicy, we learn that adding further engagements with 42:6's ambiguity would result in a refined engagement with the heart of Tilley's critique that theodicy silences sufferers. Job's final words do not allow us to make this the last word. Humans stand in relation to an infinite God and the reality of suffering defies a definitive explanation. In the face of such circumstances, Job has to opportunity to question what is happening and also has the option to repent. Many of these interpretations depend on the reader's natural and thematic impression from the story, showcasing the accessibility of resources for future thought. Burrell's contribution, in light of this,

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Genesis 18:16-33 and Habakkuk 1:1-4.

is truly a hopeful one and a step in the right direction for pastoral engagements with those who suffer.

*Trevor B Williams*

*Vanderbilt University Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion  
Nashville  
Tennessee  
United States*

*trevor.b.williams@vanderbilt.edu*